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DANDY DARLING, DETECTIVE



OR, THE BOOMERS of BIG BUFFALO.

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"GRIP-SACK SHARP" NOVELS, ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

HIDDEN HANDS AT WORK.

"STEADY, there! What's the matter, Free-
man?"

"Nothing: only my team— *Gid-ap!*"

For hours the wagon train had been toiling across hill and swale, upland and lowland, following a trail which could be called a road only through courtesy, the first wheel-prints of which had been made on that April day, never to be forgotten by "Boomer" or "Sooner," when the President's proclamation threw open to settlement that bone of contention for half a generation—Oklahoma.

Barely two weeks had passed since that important date, but men live fast in a new country, and wonders had been wrought by the landmad "rushers." Where then had been but a

"I CAN'T—DON'T—I'M AFRAID!" GASPED THE UNNERVED GIRL, KEPT ONLY FROM FALLING BY DICK'S QUICK SUPPORT.

waste of prairie grass, now stood "towns" and even "cities." And over the people had come a change to the full as great.

Then it was a wild, mad, headlong rush and scramble toward a common center; a race that could not have been swifter or more resolute had each haggard, crazy-seeming boomer been fleeing from death and the devil!

But that time had passed, never to be lived over again, save in memory, so far as Oklahoma is concerned; and though nearly every able-bodied man connected with this little wagon-train made a unit in that crazy mob of April 23d, 1889, not one of them all could be recognized by any similarity of movement on this day.

Then, they had been urged on by the haunting fear that some other would "get there" ahead of them, and claiming, hold the land so carefully selected and jealously guarded. Now, their claims were fairly defined, and only brute force could rob them of their hardly won rights.

Ahead of the train lay a deep, ugly gully, across which a rude but substantial bridge had been built during those forbidden days, by axemen working under guard and with spies posted on ever side as surety against discovery by soldiers or Indian scouts.

Two tree-trunks had been trimmed and hauled across the break, then with saplings and dirt a flooring had been laid, strong enough to upbeat a heavily loaded wagon, and wide enough for a single team to cross with ease. A low railing ran along each side of the bridge, as a preventative against shying horses.

As the train drew near this crossing, its leisurely pace slackened, and the leading team was permitted to gain a few yards on its followers. Not because any one among them all dreamed of possible danger, for nothing could have been further from their thoughts.

The workmen had done their duty thoroughly, as all men will who know that life or limb of their dear ones depend on their care. And since that memorable "hour of noon" the bridge had been tested time and time again.

The train slackened up, then came to a halt, simply because there was a gradual pitch or slope of the ground leading down to the bridge, and though the bark-covered stringers were heavy enough to support the strain of a continuous line of wagons, there was no particular need of haste.

Big Buffalo, their recently born "city," was not so many miles distant, and though the afternoon was wearing away, what matter?

"Tain't as ef we was runnin' ag'in time an' the Sooners, ye want to know!" lightly chuckled one of the drivers, as he watched Freeman guiding his team down the slope and out upon the rude bridge.

All went well until the horse sand wagon were fairly upon the bridge, but then a sharp thrill ran through those who were waiting and watching.

The horses stopped short, snorting loudly, bracing their front feet for a moment, then tossing their heads high as they backed hastily.

Freeman swung his whip angrily, but its vicious crack was never heard even by his own ears.

With a crackling crash, the stringers gave way near the middle of the crossing, and as the loaded wagon plunged forward upon the heels of the frightened horses, Freeman gave vent to a wild yell, rising up and making a flying leap to the left, trying to keep clear of the falling mass.

The scream of a tortured horse rose above the crash. A cloud of dust whirled up from the gulch, momentarily hiding all else from the startled, half-stupefied Boomers back of the slope.

For a single breath not a word was spoken. Even the horses hitched to the wagons nearest the front seemed under a spell.

Then the animals began to plunge, to back, to snort and quiver with terror. Women began to sob, children to scream and cry, men to shout and even curse in their intense excitement. Then:

"Help! fer love o'—"

"Wheel and bunch!" thundered the "wagon boss," sturdy old Hiram Powell, sending his team in a curve away from the dangerous slope by aid of whip and lines. "Head 'em in, so the critters can't run, then—Freeman first!"

Nothing more was needed by way of instructions, and in an incredibly short space of time the wagon-train was "wound up" sufficiently to be left in care of the frightened women, while the men leaped to the ground and rushed to the gully into which the bridge had fallen.

All this was done so quickly that the dust was still hanging over the ruins, in the midst of which the poor horses were struggling desperately. This pall partly masked the completeness of the wreck, but those who now looked so breathlessly over the broken bank had helped build that bridge, and hardly needed the evidence of their eyes.

Hiram Powell cast a single keen look into the gully, then paused on the brink to sharply utter the warning:

"Stiddy, lads! It's help, not hurt! Do what you can for the bosses, and—Freeman!"

There was no response, though only a few moments earlier the unfortunate driver had called out so sharply for help.

Powell did not pause to listen, nor to repeat his call. He caught sight of something—the rising dust prevented his being certain—and with little thought for his own bones, the gallant veteran went slipping and plowing his way down the steep bank, intent only on saving life if possible.

In time of flood, this deep gully was a raging torrent. Now, only a slender rivulet crept along the miry bed, making its way toward the distant Canadian.

The fall of the bridge beneath the heavily-loaded team had dammed the bed, and though, thanks to that desperate leap even as the crash came to his ears, Freeman had fallen clear of the wreck itself, it was only to be menaced by death in another shape.

"This way—you!" cried Powell, sinking past his knees in mud and water above the wreck, as he lifted the limp, seemingly dead form of the driver in his strong arms.

"He's not—dead?"

"If he isn't—stiddy! I'm as nigh mired as—" There was no breath to waste in idle speech. Though help was coming, eager and strong-handed, the task was no easy one.

If not dead, Freeman was perfectly helpless, and his ordinary weight seemed trebled by his limp unconsciousness, to say nothing of the coating of mud and slime which rendered their grip so uncertain.

The luckless fellow was carried part way up the bank, Hiram Powell taking advantage of a narrow shelf of dirt and gravel to say:

"Stiddy him down a bit, lads, an' ketch breath while I—Hellow, Free! woke up ag'in?"

"Don't let—Whoa, dandies!" huskily muttered the driver, lifting his head for a brief space, his mud-covered hands working convulsively, as though they still gripped the lines.

"Thar's somethin' wrong with this leg, Uncle Hi," spoke up one of the men. "Reckon he's broke it!"

"Reckon he's in big luck 'twasn't his neck," came the grim response, as the wagon boss drew a long breath in preparation for work. "Thar! he's turned fainty ag'in! Easy him all ye kin, lads, but we want to do the totin' while he cain't feel it so sharp. Ketch hold: now!"

By far the larger number of Boomers were gathered around the ruin of the bridge, barred by the narrow quarters from lending their mate assistance; and though even the most sanguine could see that their labors would be of little avail, each man fell to work as heartily as though his own life depended on the outcome.

Broken stringers, cross-pieces, wagon and horses, lay piled up in the narrow bed of the little creek, and only when the cloud of dust cleared away could the thoroughness of the wreck be appreciated.

The wagon-tongue was broken, and a splinter from it protruded above the withers of the off-horse, now out of its agony. Its mate still struggled desperately to free itself, and a minute or two was spent by the Boomers in cutting the harness and dragging away the lumber which had slipped from the wagon, now standing nearly on end.

"No use," at length spoke one of the workers, ceasing his efforts. "You kin see fer yourselves, neighbors!"

Enough had been done to show all how terribly the poor creature had been injured, and though they could hardly have felt the doom of a fellow-being more severely, not a single voice was lifted in remonstrance as John Clegg slowly drew the heavy revolver from the holster at his hip.

Even could they convey the horse to the level above, it could have barely one chance in a hundred of living; and then would be a miserable cripple. So—

A sharp report, and the hopeless struggle was over.

This merciful cruelty over, the Boomers took matters more calmly. The wagon had been loaded with green lumber, fresh from the little portable saw-mill which had been kept working both night and day for long weeks past. There was nothing to be injured by delay, and now that they saw Hiram Powell and his mates had carried Freeman out of the gully, their native curiosity awoke in full force.

Each man had taken part in building that bridge, and each one would have taken oath no common test could have proven it lacking. Then—why had it broken down so completely?

"I knowed it!" boarsely cried one of the party, his face almost ghastly pale, his eyes blazing as though backed by living fire. "Look! This stringer has bin sawed plum' in two!"

In grim silence the Boomers crowded around, gazing at the tell-tale trunk, feeling of it with unsteady fingers, breathing sharp and heavily. In silence they carried their investigations further, clearing away the debris until each broken end was laid bare, bringing water to wash the mud from the separated portions, in their determination to leave no possible room for doubt.

When this was accomplished, the Boomers left the gully and passed over to where Hiram Powell was caring for the injured driver, and

as the wagon boss glanced up from his work, John Clegg nodded gloomily.

"TwASN'T none o' our fault, Uncle Hi. The stringers was sawed so nigh through, each in two places, that they *hed* to go bu'st!"

"What! you don't mean to say—"

"The Sooners done it—cuss 'em! Cheatin' nur bluffin' couldn't faze us, an' now they're gittin' down to bloody murder!"

CHAPTER II.

THE WORK OF THE WHIRLWIND.

HIRAM POWELL made no reply, but his strong jaws closed with an audible click as he once more bent over the injured driver, fastening the hastily improvised splints in place about the broken limb, the bone of which he had put in place to the best of his ability. His first duty was owing to the helpless, and true to his nature he performed that duty.

The startling tidings spread like wild-fire, and nearly all of the Boomers hastened to the gully, or to its brink, women and children lining the latter while their husbands and fathers slipped down to the wreck itself for closer inspection.

Few words were spoken, though nearly every face betrayed how important this discovery was esteemed.

Other blows had been dealt them of late, but none so reckless, so desperate, so utterly lawless as this. Nearly all had foreseen trouble before them in their fight for a home, but few had counted on anything so bitter as this.

"I can't believe it, brother!" murmured Lettice Acton, the adopted child of Hiram Powell, drawing back from the brink and turning to her brother, Frederick, who was scraping some of the mud from his garments, gathered while aiding in carrying the crippled driver from the gully. "There must be some mistake!"

"The Sooners made it, then," with a short, hard laugh. "It's their mistake that human beings are not lying down yonder—dead, like poor Freeman's pet team."

"If I think me like dose—why, dot would be murder!"

Fred Acton laughed again, softer than before, as he met those wide-open eyes, blue as the unclouded sky above their heads. And the old music came back to his voice as he answered Christine Brockelmyer:

"It was meant to be murder, Christine. I'd keep it from you, if lying would do it, for it's an ugly welcome to meet you at the very threshold of your new home."

"It was—what you call—omen of the bad, then?" hesitated pretty Christine, wrinkling her fair brows as was her habit when she found it difficult to select the right word to fit her meaning?

"Not a bit of it, my dear girl," laughed Acton, driving the clouds from his own face for the sake of the woman he loved with all his heart. "Or, if a bad omen, it's one for the Sooners, don't you see?"

"Sooner? Sooner?" frowned Christine, tapping a foot rapidly on the dry grass which covered the ground so thickly. "I hear me that word so many times, already! Who vhas dose Sooner mans, anyhow?"

"You explain, please, Lettice: Uncle Hi is calling me!" hastily said Fred, turning away to obey the summons,

Now that the worst was known, the excitement gradually calmed, and the Boomers fell to work like men used to encounter and surmount even greater obstacles.

Their journey was at an end for the time being, since this deep gulch must be crossed before they could reach their destination, and crossing it with loaded teams was an impossibility without a bridge.

So much they had learned weeks ago, while camped just without the "promised land," on the border line. The gully had been explored from end to end, reaching the river on one hand, and running direct against the hills at the other extremity. There was not a single point where a crossing could be effected without a bridge, and this was the most available of three points where even a bridge was possible with their limited means of constructing such.

The Boomers gathered together to discuss the situation, and it did not take them long to arrive at the first decision.

"We can't cross without a bridge, and we can't build one in a minute," said Hiram Powell. "I reckon we can get the timbers ready before dark, but the building'll have to wait for morning. So—pitch camp!"

Little time was wasted in taking this first step. The teams were manned and the wagons placed conveniently, then the horses were unhitched and staked out to graze on the winter-cured grass, which here grew in great luxuriance.

While this was being done, Powell and Fred Acton cared for Freeman, first pitching a little tent, and then carrying him into it. One of the women volunteered to watch with the injured teamster, her daughter being old enough to care for her family.

While camp was being pitched, Lettice and Christine had little to occupy them, for the Boomers were nearly all native born Americans, and seldom called upon their women-folk to per-

form work which could be accomplished without them. And Mrs. Rhodes, a cousin to Uncle Hi, was more than able to see to arranging their simple tent.

"It was very strange people I find me, here," Christine laughed, tossing back her heavy braids of flaxen hair, and at the same time casting aside the anxiety with which she had been listening to the explanation given by Lettice, in accordance with Fred's request. "We was Boomers. Oders, *dey* was Sooners. I know me that much, but—I can no more make out as that! And so—why trouble over it? Why not leaf dose to Fred und dem oder mans? Why not be yoost like little children—so gay?"

Lettice turned away with a slight shiver. She had not taken to this gay, merry, light-hearted German lassie, at first, though she had learned to conquer her first aversion for Fred's sake; Fred, whose heart was captured by Christine almost at first sight, and who had grown to love her with all the ardor of his fiery, untamed heart.

But this gay, careless laugh hurt her now, for she could not forget by what a seemingly slight accident Uncle Hiram Powell had been deprived of the lead, his right as wagon boss, only a few minutes before that wrecked bridge was reached. Only for that!

But Christine took no offense, though she seemed quick to read the full meaning of that averted face. Her round arms stole quickly about Lettice, her dimpled chin rested lovingly on the maiden's shoulder, and her words came low and tremulous:

"You *t'ink* I vhas no heart, nein? Dot vhas a mistake, Letty! I know those thoughts you maken right now! Und—I vhas so glad when I know me how Oncle Hiram don't go down dot bridge along! So glad! It makes me laugh, shust to keep dot crying fit off—see?"

More and more broken grew her speech, as ever was the case when excited, and as Lettice turned quickly, she saw two bright tears shining in those big blue eyes.

"Und so—I laugh me all oafer! I vould like me to shump, und sing, und kick up, und vrolic like doze—dem—is it picks, nein?"

Pigs or colts, it was all the same, now. Lettice forgot her brief anger, and when Christine proposed taking a little stroll in quest of wild-flowers, while waiting for the evening meal, she readily agreed.

Through all of this, Fred Acton kept one eye on his sister and the girl of his love. He promptly did all Uncle Hi bade him, but he was never too busy to keep posted as to the movements of the girls.

He saw them stroll leisurely away from the hastily pitched camp, and rightly divining their intentions, he made a note of their course, following them with his eyes as long as possible.

By the time Freeman was cared for, the teams were unhitched and the horses put out to feed. Then the Boomers gathered together once more, and Powell spoke promptly:

"You all know what's got to be done, men, without my telling you. We want to get to Big Buffalo. That lies on the other side of this gulch. We can't cross without a bridge, and take our teams with us. We want the lumber to build our houses with. So—the first thing to be done is to get out new stringers!"

"We kin git 'em right enough, Uncle Hi, an' that afore dark!" cried big John Clegg, over whose shoulder already rested the haft of a keen ax. "Jest call off the choppers, an' then 'p'int the haulers. The sooner we fall to work, the quicker we'll airn our grub!"

Fred Acton waited until Powell named the men for each job, and as his own was not called, he gratefully moved away, watching his chance to slip off along the trail left by the two girls.

His ardor led him to make the move a little too soon, for jealous eyes noted his movements, and in a coarse, jeering tone, John Clegg called out loudly:

"Tell the ladies I'd come too, Acton, ef they wasn't work byar fer all able-bodied men to do, afore spoonin'!"

Acton flung an angry glance over his shoulder, but as a burst of laughter came from the Boomers, he made no reply, even when one of the men called out, lightly:

"Don't mind him, Fred, lad. John's only hot in the collar fer knowin' he ain't good-lookin' 'nough fer to cut in—or cut out, fer that matter!"

Clegg smothered an angry oath in its birth, then strode off toward the timber island where the other stringers had been cut, and where all knew others could be found. The other axmen followed his lead, while a number of Boomers slid down the steep bank for the purpose of robbing the wreck of cross-pieces, thus saving both cutting and hauling fresh ones.

The women set their children to gathering dry grass and small fagots for fires, while they themselves set about making preparations for the evening meal, though they had all calculated on enjoying their next meal in their newly born town, Big Buffalo.

For a while more than one keen pair of eyes kept anxiously roving about in half-expectation of discovering their as yet hidden enemies, but

astime passed on, the Boomers grew absorbed in their work, and all such fears were forgotten for the time being.

Unnoticed for a time, a curious black cloud crept higher up the horizon, and it was not until the warm rays of the declining sun were shut off, that any one paid attention to the cloud.

One of the women, turning away from the fire over which she was arranging her pots, was the first to notice the ominous-looking bank, and as only those can who have had personal experience with hurricanes or tornadoes, she watched the cloud in breathless silence for a space.

Until a tail-like column of whirling vapor shot downward from the greenish-black mass, wavering around at the tip as if in anger at finding nothing substantial to fasten upon; then she cried out shrilly:

"*A cyclone! A cyclone is coming!*"

Instantly all was the wildest confusion among the Boomers, for by far the greater portion of the company knew something from practical experience of that terrible scourge, and all knew how utterly powerless human strength or will is in the front of such a terrible power.

"Stan' stiddy, all o' ye!" cried Uncle Hiram, loudly, even harshly, only his vernacular betraying his own excitement. "Tain't nothin' but a whirly-gust, fer the day's bin cool an' dry, an'— Didn't I tell ye so?" with a break of triumph in his high notes as that ominous "tail" seemed to blow away like a spiral of smoke.

Few as his words had been, they carried assurance with them to his bearers. None of the well-known warnings with which a tornado invariably heralds its coming, had been noticed that day; and thus relieved of their worst fears, the Boomers stood in silence, watching the curious rollings and tossings of the storm-cloud.

Minute after minute passed, and not a gust of wind reached the camp, though the cloud was mounting higher and spreading out its top in curious billows of green and purple and black. Then—

With a roaring buzz, a column of dust and grass and leaves rose from the ground, whirling swiftly, casting a dry spray of debris on all sides, swooping straight down upon the camp.

A number of the men rushed for the horses, others sped to their frightened women and children, a few tumbled down the gully, just as the dry whirlwind struck the camp, tearing up the blazing sticks of wood and burling them broadcast for many yards.

For a time the dust enveloped everything, and the swirling winds kept the Boomers lying close to the ground. But then a wild, startling cry broke forth, and all faced a new peril.

The blazing brands had set the rank grass of last season afire, and the strong winds were fanning it to fearful speed!

"Whar's the gals?" hoarsely cried Uncle Hi. "Whar's my Letty?"

In track o' the fire—God pity 'em!

CHAPTER III.

BEFORE THE STORM.

FRED ACTON bit his lip sharply to keep back the angry retort that rose in his throat, but the sneering speech of John Clegg was not entirely without effect, even if this was not shown on the surface.

The young man kept on in the line he had marked out for himself, but his pace was less hurried, and his thoughts were not entirely devoted to love and love-making.

He had long known that John Clegg admired Christine Brockelmyer, and up to within the last week or so, he had looked upon that adoration as a fact better fitted for smiles and sly jesting with Christine than as food for jealousy. But of late a change had come over the spirit of his dreams, and even while stubbornly refusing to admit, even to himself, the possibility of serious rivalry, he could not remain entirely blind to the fact that Christine *did* show the stalwart Boomer rather more consideration than he would like his chosen bride to bestow upon another man.

"Because he's a crowder, and she's too kind-hearted to bluff him off as he deserves," muttered the young man as he cast another look back, his jealousy-sharpened eye instantly singling out the object of his aversion from all the other Boomers. "I'll climb him yet! I'd have read him a lesson before, only for Uncle Hi!"

To an impartial observer, noting the two men and contrasting their physical proportions, there might have been something whimsical in this stern declaration; but Acton meant all he said, and never for an instant doubted his ability to fully execute the threats his tongue put in shape.

He was but little above the medium height, and rather slenderly built, but perfect health and a free, active life of recent years, had both developed and toughened his muscles, until he might have given even the tall, sinewy teamster a hard battle for the supremacy, in case aught should bring them together in actual fight.

Fred Acton was now out of sight of the camp, thanks to a slight rise in the ground around which the trail led him, and in his eagerness to catch his first glimpse of the rambling

maidens, he forgot his anger against John Clegg, pressing forward with quickened pace.

Up to this moment he knew he was following directly along the course taken by his sister and Christine, for his wistful eyes had kept them in sight until rounding the little mound; but now he must trust to quickness of wit and keenness of vision if that reunion was to be accomplished.

Following an actual trail over such ground was beyond his powers. The land lay quite low, "second bottom," as it is termed; and the grass had attained a growth both rank and heavy the past season. It had not been pastured nor burned over, and the new growth of green grass was almost entirely covered up by the brown blanket.

Here and there were zigzag paths or trails; partly the work of wild animals, though the winter winds and snow-fall had something to do with shaping them. These offered a choice for the ramblers, but who could decide which one they had taken?

Fred laughed softly as the query flashed across his brain. Just then he felt that he could go to Christine with his eyes shut!

"And when we come back—well, I'll introduce you to my wife—that-is-to-be, John Clegg!" laughed Acton, springing along the narrow trail where the rank grass rose above his shoulders on either side.

A more unlikely region for finding wild flowers could hardly have been selected, and long ere this Christine had admitted as much to her fair companion, adding half pathetically:

"I was like that, all the time! I makes me so many mistakes! I can nothing do right—is it not so, fraulien?"

"Ask Fred, and see what he says," smiled Lettice, flashing a swift glance into those innocent blue eyes.

"Oh, Fritz! You think—he will come by us then?"

Lettice laughed afresh, too true a girl herself to answer such a simple question. Then her face grew serious, and her little hand pressed Christine's full, round arm almost appealingly as she whispered:

"Don't try to coquet with him, dear, unless you wish to make his true heart bleed. He loves you; he means to ask you to love him, and him alone of all the men on earth. And you—how is it with you, Christine?"

A bit of fire leaped into those big blue eyes, and those red lips curled just a trifle.

"Was your brother tell you ask me dose, Miss Acton?"

"No, no," was the hasty reply. "He only told me that he loved you above all else on earth. He only said that without your love in return he would rather die than live."

"Vhas dot so?" drawled Christine, her head proudly flung back, her trimly booted foot tapping the earth rapidly. "It vhas you he tries on dose loaf-sbeeches, eh? Und he esch how dose sounds, nein?"

"Hush!" quickly uttered Lettice, clapping a hand over those proud lips, with a half-frightened glance in the direction of camp. "I think Fred is coming—I am almost sure I heard yes!"

A clear, mellow call came floating through the air as she spoke.

"I did not mean—don't punish him for my fault, Christine," the sister hurriedly added. "I forced the secret from him, before he knew what I was driving at. He made me promise never to tell—he wanted to be the first to breathe the sweet words into your ears, and—"

Christine interrupted her agitated speech with a low, mellow laugh, and Lettice drew a freer breath as she met that frank, merry smile.

"You will not—you do like him, just a little, then, dear?"

"Oh, yes! I like him so little as—how little you like most, eh?" mocked Christine, then turning and sending a clear, musical warble through her hollowed palm.

Acton heard and responded, and shortly after overtook the girls, his handsome face flushed, his brown eyes all aglow.

"You come to help carry our wild posies, Friedrich?" laughed Christine, holding out her empty hands, both of which Acton quickly caught and pressed warmly; so warmly that Christine, blushing brightly, turned toward Lettice, saying: "Is dot right, fraulien? He squeeze mine fingers like—like—is it cane-mill?"

Lettice affected not to hear, hurrying on in quest of the flowers which were rare indeed, but Acton flushed half angrily as he dropped those soft hands, muttering:

"Will you never be serious, Christine? Must you always try to turn my words and actions to ridicule?"

"Rid-i-cool? Is dot a kind of posy-flower we look for?" innocently murmured the German lassie, flashing one glance into his handsome face, then hastening along the trail once more.

Acton followed in silence, lagging a little, still hoping that his sister would manage to secure him a private interview with this tantalizing maiden, filling the interval with shaping and reshaping his sentences, inwardly cursing his poverty of language.

He had so much to tell, so much to say, such

oceans of love to pour forth at the feet of this, his blue-eyed divinity! So much—yet the words were lacking!

Even if Lettice had not opened her eyes by those hasty, ill-considered words, Christine must have read the truth in his strange manner. And though for a time she held him at bay, adroitly postponing the important confession which he had plainly determined to make after some fashion, she could not help seeing that this was only temporary; that the truth must be laid bare before they again saw the wagons.

Lettice played her sisterly part well, for she managed to separate herself from the lovers in spite of all Christine could—or did—do. As for Fred, it may be doubted whether he even remembered her existence just then!

"Christine!"

"Mr. Acton?"

Her cold, almost sharp notes sent a chill through the lover, but he would not take warning. His passion had reached such a desperate pitch that nothing but full and open speech could satisfy him.

He had no difficulty in finding words, now the ice was fairly broken; now that the woman whom he worshiped was facing him, her head bowed, her eyes watching the slowly moving shoe-tip as it softly patted the earth.

He never knew just what he did say, other than that he tried to make her realize how wholly, how entirely his future was bound up in her, how surely his life or death hung upon her lips that day.

Christine listened without interrupting him, uttering never a word until he paused for her decision, panting and almost breathless from intense emotion.

That alone should have warned him, but it did not. He hoped, he listened even as he longed for her answer, feeling sure that his great love could not fail to win its sweet reward.

Even when Christine spoke, with hardly a trace of the accent which ever increased with excitement or agitation, he refused to doubt.

"I wish you had waited longer, Friedrich. I wish you had not said so much."

"I haven't told you half—I could not tell you even the thousandth part how dearly I love you, Christine! Not though I spent a full year in trying! And now—you love me, darling?"

"Wait," deftly eluding his eager embrace, then pushing him back with her strong if shapely arm. "I have listened to you. It is your turn to hear me speak."

"I am listening. Only—you do love me, Christine?"

"So?" with a half-mocking smile flitting across her comely face.

"You can't deny it! Don't deny it, Christine!"

"Listen, you, Friedrich," again eluding his eager arms, a frown coming into her fair face. "It is not time for—it is too soon for such embraces, even if you knew me better as you do know—what?"

"I know that I love you, Christine! That is enough for me!"

"But for me—eh?" with a faint, puzzling smile. "Is it—how you say? Is it loaf only dot makes the horses go?"

"I am not rich, Christine, only in love; but I can give you a home and keep you in comfort until riches come to us both. I can—"

"Wait, Friedrich," once more cool and composed. "It is nothing you know of my life gone by. It is worser as nothing you know of my family that was once."

"It is you I love, Christine. All the world else is worse than nothing in comparison. And if you love me even a little, I'll—"

"Wait, once more, Friedrich," cutting him short with an impatient gesture. "I have to speak just so many words: I have me to say—it is too quick for telling I loaf you like you want."

"How long must I wait before you do tell me, Christine?"

"Maybe for all time."

"Christine!"

"Come let us walk on. Lettice will think we go lose ourselves. And I will talk as we go. Will that do, Friedrich?"

"If you will only say that you love me—just a little, dear!" pleaded the love-sick youth, piteously.

"So little as dot?" laughed Christine, measuring the first joint on her slender fore-finger. "I do loaf you so much—anyway!"

Fred caught at a straw, as lovers will, but Christine deftly took one of his arms in place of his arms taking her, moving on once more in smiling silence.

For several minutes this lasted. Fred was afraid to insist on a more generous admission, and the girl seemed content to postpone the end of what, at best, promised to be an uncomfortable scene.

During their conversation the storm-cloud was rising in the west, and as the face of the sun was covered, Christine gave a start as of sudden uneasiness, her blue eyes scanning the threatening sky.

"Is it rain, you think, Friedrich?" she asked, clinging more closely to the arm of her lover.

"I hardly think so: at most 'twill be only a shower," was his reassuring speech. "There is no danger for you—with me, darling!"

But Christine seemed frightened as she glanced around, saying:

"Your sister! Where is Lettice?"

CHAPTER IV.

FOR LIFE AND FOR LOVE.

FRED ACTON gave a start, staring around him in surprise. Until that instant he had completely forgotten the very existence of his sister. But now he opened his lips to shout aloud her name, feeling confident that she must be somewhere near them.

Before he could do so, however, Christine clapped a hand over his lips, at the same time hurrying him along one of the winding trails, saying rapidly:

"Don't! You make her go scare by calling like dot! She is here! Dis way—I was see her go—we catch her quick, I know!"

Her very fright served to quell the brief uneasiness felt by the brother, and though he yielded willingly, running lightly by her side, he was laughing at her terrified haste.

"It is nothing, Christine; nothing more than an April shower. And though you are sweeter than sugar—both of you, I mean, of course!—a bit of sprinkle can hardly melt you down!"

"You was sure-for-certain, Friedrich?" panted Christine, pressing her free hand over her heart, as though hoping thus to quiet its throbings. "It is not—how you call it? A sly-coon?"

Then Acton fairly roared with laughter. Not so much at Christine's curious twisting of that familiar word, but his nerves had been kept at extreme tension so long that they must relax.

The German lassie frowned pettishly, jerking her hand from his arm, and giving her short skirts an impatient twitch as she moved on, with a flashing glance of reproach over one shoulder.

"Is it so your loaf stows out, Mr. Acton? Vell, I vhas glad all oafer me dot I vinds me it ouft so soon, already!"

"I didn't mean—"

"It vhas mean, I dinks me—sure!" her voice growing colder and harder. "You see me I vhas scared, und you—you cackle like von oldt hen-chicken—so dere!"

This time Acton would not be denied, and clasped the angry girl in his arms, pressing her tightly to his breast, gazing ardently into her eyes, his lips quivering with intense longing, yet hardly daring to take their reward by force.

"I did laugh, darling, but not at your fears, not at your words. I laughed because I saw that you really loved me, even as I love you, my angel, my life, my all!"

"You saw all dot?" murmured Christine, a faint smile coming into her face, her great eyes drooping after a brief encounter with his passionate orbs.

"I saw all that—yes!" was his swift response, his lips drawing nearer, only to be foiled by her swiftly shifted face. "Can you deny it, my love? Can you look me full in the eyes and say that you do not love me, Christine?"

"Let me go—I will not talk while—sol" breaking away with a strength such as few women could have exhibited. "See!" with a short laugh that betrayed a trace of scorn. "It takes a man to keep me captive, Friedrich Acton!"

"And am I not a man, Christine?"

"A man, but are you the man?" speaking swiftly, holding up a hand to forbid an interruption. "Listen, Fritz: I have me somet'ings to tell you, right away now!"

"It comes back by me now, the way my mutter lived. She vhas marry a man—like you! She loaf him—he loaf her: so much as a baby-man like he could loaf!"

"Christine!"

"It is so, Friederich Acton. My mutter vhas a slave t'rough her loaf, all because she shut her eyes und vould neffer listen by her own people when dey tell her true; dot a woman needs a man—a man, you see, Friedrich, not a play-man!"

"Am I not a man?" hoarsely demanded Acton, flushing hotly before that half-mocking scrutiny.

"Yes; by name. But how by nature? Look at me!" proudly drawing her superb figure up erect, flinging out her strong arms. "How would I enjoy life as a love-slave? How would—Look!" breaking off abruptly and pointing once more toward the west.

The storm-cloud was wider, higher, blacker. An ominous, roaring sound came dully to their ears, growing louder and more distinct with each second that passed.

Once more the heroine was lost sight of in the woman, and with a low, frightened cry, Christine flung herself into the willing arms of her lover.

Right willingly he accepted the precious burden, clasping her almost fiercely to his breast, raining hot kisses on her lips, unrebuked in that minute of terror.

The first sharp gust of wind swooped down upon them, causing both to stagger, cutting short the sweetest moment Frederick Acton had ever

experienced, drawing a moaning cry of fear from Christine's lips.

"Safe me, Fritz! Safe me from—is it a sly-coon, Friedrich?"

He could hardly recognize her words; his reply was torn to tatters by the whirlwind and smothered by the cloud of dense dust and frayed blades of dry grass.

The wind twisted them from their feet, rolling them over and over in the flattened grass, threatening to beat the very breath of life out of their lungs; but only for a few seconds.

Then the whirlwind passed on to do its work elsewhere, and Christine sprung nimbly to her feet before Acton could lend her a hand.

She forced a laugh as she saw him, dimly through the still eddying dust, gouging his eyes clear enough to see; but then a new fear assailed her as she distinctly recognized the scent of smoke!

In vain she stood on tip-toes as she faced the direction from whence the whirlwind had come. Already the stiff, rank blades of grass had straightened up, and here it grew high enough to almost entirely shut off their view to the west.

"Is it—can it be fire?" cried Christine, almost fiercely grasping an arm of her half-blinded lover. "Look! Tell me—if you be a man, tell me it is not fire!"

Acton had suffered more than Christine from that fall, since he had thought only of saving her as much as possible. The heavy shock had half-stunned and wholly bewildered him; but at this passionate appeal, he did what he could to calm her fears.

"It is not fire—how could it be fire, dear girl? It is only—"

"They was start fire by the camp. I see it before we come avay, I tell you!" stamping her foot in what seemed a frenzy of anger. "Oh! if Yohn—if my goot Yohn vhas only by me now!"

"What John—not John Clegg?"

"Yes, my Yohn—Yohn Clegg! Oh, if he vhas only here now!"

"I am here. What could John Clegg do more than I can do?" harshly demanded Acton, catching her by an arm and actually shaking her!

Either that tone, or that action, calmed Christine as by magic. She faced him, a half-scornful, half-bitter smile coming into her dirt-soiled face as she spoke again:

"What would Yohn do, you esk, Mr. Acton? He would make me taller as us two both! He would swing me high—like a monkey a pole up top! He would—Oh!"

For Acton, driven half frantic by her words, caught Christine in his muscular if slender arms, and swung her upon one shoulder, seeming to mind her weight no more than if she had been an infant.

"I'm not your Yohn, but I'm a better man than he dare prove himself, Christine! Now—you can see there is no fire!"

But Christine saw enough to wish to see more, and with an agility marvelous in a woman, she sprang to her feet, steadyng herself by a single hand on Acton's head for an instant, then rising to her full height, sweeping the region before her with quick, keen glances.

To have her worst fears more than confirmed! To see how widely the fire had spread during those few seconds since the passage of the whirlwind! To see the ruddy flames leaping high and making mighty strides toward them, driven by the brisk wind which followed in the wake of that eddying column!

With a cry of terror, Christine sprung from Fred's shoulder, with such force and so unexpectedly that he was flung heavily backward, though she alighted safely upon her nimble feet. And as Christine saw his prostrate form, she cried out anew:

"Oh, for my Yohn! If Yohn Clegg was only by me now!"

"Could John Clegg do more than die for you, Christine?" hoarsely panted Fred, regaining his feet. "Could he—"

"More as dot?" echoed Christine, passionately. "Yes! He could safe me from dose awful flames! He could safe me my life!"

"I'll save you, or die trying!" cried Fred, passionately. "Come, we must run for it, and—did you see nothing of Letty?"

"Yes—oafer dis vhay!" panted the young woman, springing forward along one of the winding paths.

Even in those awful moments both could see that their only hope of safety lay in keeping to one of these paths, where the rank grass was bent or broken or trodden down by some past force. No human being could force a passage through that rank, slightly bending growth half fast enough to outstrip the roaring flames! Even a man on horseback would find it no easy task to keep in advance of the fiery demons!

"Go on—I'll cover you all I can, Christine!" hoarsely shouted Acton, to make his words heard above that terrible roaring sound from the rear. "If I can't save you—I'll be the first to die, anyway!"

There came no reply. Christine was running swiftly, following the crooks—so many!—in the narrow trail, the rank grass-blades brushing her arms on either side as she flew along. And wo-

man though she might be, Acton found it no easy task to keep up with the pace she set him!

Even without the awful roaring of the flames to warn them of coming death, there could no longer be a doubt of the dread truth. Already the air was full of smoke—bitter and acrid, doubled by the gasses set free from the green growth that was forcing its way up through the last year's crop. Already charred blades were eddying all about them. And now and then a blazing bunch of grass would shoot through the smoke-darkened air like a meteor, to die in flight, or to swoop down to earth, to start another glowing demon in chase of the fugitives.

Thicker grew the smoke, and more unbearable the air, just when the fugitives needed full and free breaths the most sorely.

Already it was almost like rushing through a furnace, laden not only with fire, but with dust, and smoke, and cinders.

Fred Acton repeatedly shouted aloud the name of his sister during the earlier part of that terrible race for life, but there came no answer to his calls, and then he ceased to shout. He had no breath to spare. Already his lungs seemed filling up with fire.

He could not shout, but even then he tried to call out encouragement to his loved one. Even when his brain was whirling dizzily, his eyeballs scorching in their sockets, his breath coming like puffs of dry fire, he tried to assure her of safety: *she might die, but his love should be saved!*

Christine spent no breath in shouting, but ran on at top speed, knowing that death in its most hideous shape was pressing them hard and closely. If they might only come to—what?

The river was still far away. Was there any other refuge?

Almost blinded though he was, Fred Acton managed to keep not far behind Christine, his sole remaining thought being to die in her company, since die they surely must!

Then—

"Christine!" he cried, hoarsely, dashing both hands across his eyes to clear his vision as he staggered forward. "My life—my love—where are you? Speak—speak to me—Christine!"

There came no answer. There was no Christine visible!

If she had fallen, he surely must have seen her, or stumbled over her body! And so reasoning, he staggered on, hoarsely sounding her name.

Then, just after passing a dense clump of tall grass, there came a smothered report, and without a groan he fell, like one shot through the brain!

CHAPTER V.

DANDY DARLING ON PICKET DUTY.

"THE Big Buffalo Boomers, fast enough, I reckon!" muttered Dandy Darling, lowering the field-glasses from his eyes, drawing a long breath as of relief, then flashing a swift glance around him. "I'd give a big round dollar to know just how many other fellows are watching that outfit, too!"

If there were any such, his keen eyes failed to detect the fact, or light on any suspicious sign to add weight to the fancy.

A peculiar sound came up in his throat; half-laugh, half-growl, followed by the indistinct words:

"All the same, they're there, fast enough! I can feel it in my bones, as Jimmy John used to say! There—covering what sort of hatching, I wonder?"

He was sheltered under the edge of a clump of bushes growing on the side of the hill, which formed part of the low, irregular range dividing the "second bottom" from the prairie proper. This elevation, comparatively slight though it was, gave him a clear, unobstructed view of all the region lying before him, even to the very borders of the Canadian.

Far away, approaching so slowly as to seem immovable to the naked eye, was a slender string of white-capped wagons, and this it was that extorted that ejaculation, half of relief, half of expectation, from the lips of the man who seemed to be doing picket duty on the hill-side.

"Their last trip, old Powell said it would be," the young man continued, in tones barely above his breath, the glasses once more called into play. "Wonder if he was a prophet? Wonder if the Sooners will—Steady, old man!" breaking off with a half-laugh at himself. "Better wonder whether you're going crazy, as well as crack-brained!"

A tinge of red crept into his bronzed face, and his bright black eyes cast a quick glance around him, like one who anticipated scoff or idle jest at his expense.

"Dandy, old man, I'd call you an idiot, if it wasn't for insulting my mother's son!" he frowned, doubling up his fist and shaking it solemnly before his own face: "A sheep-thief, caught with wool between his teeth, isn't a circumstance, for *he* could claim that the wind blew it there while he was asleep and snoring with mouth wide open. But *you*; that look around would convict you of guilt before the highest court in all the land!"

That slight embarrassment, brought out more

fully by his very attempt to cover it over with mock censure, seemed to add to his charms as a handsome, dashing young fellow; and, truly, one might have looked both far and wide without finding his superior in that respect.

Dandy Darling, he had called himself when, something over a month before, he had first struck the camp of the Boomers, then waiting on the border of their long-wished-for Paradise, held at bay, by the stringent rules to be enforced against all who prematurely invaded Oklahoma.

He might not have given that name, or title, whichever it might be, had not one of the company recognized him for what he was, and gave him hearty welcome both as man and official: "The Daisy Detective," as he introduced Darling to his fellows, that evening.

Then, as now, Dandy Darling looked more like a dashing cowboy, or cattle prince, than one of the human bloodhounds to whom society owe such a heavy debt—of good or evil, according to the man!

He was quite young to have gained both a name and a reputation, even in the "go-ahead" West, where men are often veterans, if not on the retired list, long before the keenest eye can detect a stray thread of silver among the gold, or bronze, or jet, as the case may be; certainly a year or two under thirty, at the outside.

As he lay beneath the clump of bushes, Dandy Darling seemed but little, if anything, above the average in height, and rather slight in build than bulky; but his occasional movements betrayed no lack of muscle. He was what would be termed a "big-little man."

His garb was that of a cowboy who has only himself to waste money upon, and one who takes pleasure in adorning a graceful subject.

His broad-brimmed hat, plain and simple though it might seem to one of the uninitiated, must have cost a big handful of silver dollars, for it bore the magic brand of Stetson on its inside, and had been "built to order."

His garments were equally plain, yet fully as costly; free from all flashiness, yet undeniably the "rig out" of a genuine prairie dandy, with whom cost was no particular object.

A belt of silk webbing encircled his trim waist, the loops filled with fixed ammunition suitable for both Winchester rifle and the pair of revolvers now reposing in the spring-top scabbards at each hip; of stiff leather, covered over with fawn-skin, which formed the ground for really artistic head-work, representing a spray of golden-eyed daisies, tied with a "true lover's knot" in blue.

His hair was black as jet, its natural gloss hardly marred by exposure to the sun and dust of travel. It was worn long, the slightly curling locks touching the shoulders when tucked back of his ears.

His eyes were of the same sable hue, keen and bright, quick moving, yet steadfast and true as they were honest and frank.

His complexion was naturally dark, deepened now by the bronzing sun, but smooth and clear as that of a fair woman, yet without a trace of effeminacy in his clear-cut features.

For some little time Dandy Darling watched the slow moving wagon train through his glasses, seeming to find a powerful interest in the quiet occupation.

After that self-reproach he uttered no word, no sound, gave no clew to his thoughts; yet these were earnest, if not grave, judging from his rigid features while noting the approach to the gulch across which the bridge had been flung.

Although he had no suspicion of the grim truth, something seemed to warn him that here, if at all, the enemy would show their hand. That ugly barrier once passed, what could bar the way of the Boomers?

With an interest which he might have found it difficult to explain even to himself, Dandy Darling watched the leading team as it passed down the short slope and struck the bridge. And though the glass was hardly powerful enough to clearly bring forth features, at such a distance, he knew that, contrary to the rule, Hiram Powell was not leading the way on that occasion.

He gave a short, sharp ejaculation as the catastrophe took place, dropping the glass in his natural excitement, then catching it up again as that cloud of dust rose on the air.

"Not smoke—thank Heaven for that!" broke from his lips the next moment, the fear of a deadly ambuscade vanishing as swiftly. "The bridge has broken down, and—Please God! *she* was not with him!"

Thanks to his glasses, Dandy Darling could view all that followed with nearly as much accuracy as though he had been one of that excited company, and knowing that he could not reach the spot in time to be of material help, he maintained his post, watching all that took place.

Suddenly his glass became fixed, and he caught his breath sharply.

"It is!" he breathed, in hushed tones, as he held that trim, graceful figure in the field-glass. "I'd know her form among a thousand!"

There were two fair forms within his vision, but Dandy Darling saw only one: that of Lettice Acton. For him, just then, Christine Brockley had no existence.

Lettice soon changed her position, and he lost

sight of her for the time being. And for lack of a better subject, Dandy Darling watched each movement made by the Boomers.

He saw that at least one man had suffered hurt of some sort by that accident. He saw that the Boomers were going into camp, as for the night, since their further progress was barred until another bridge could be built.

"If they'll be let construct it!" he muttered, with a frown. "What caused the break-down? Not a loaded team alone; untampered with, that bridge would have held up a locomotive! Then—there's deviltry lying back of it all, and I know it!"

Guided by that firm belief, Dandy Darling slowly, carefully swept his glass around, searching for some sign or token of the enemies he suspected. He failed to detect any such, but he did see what had so far escaped the attention of the Boomers: the slowly rising storm-cloud now lying low down in the west.

"That means more wind than rain, or I'm no weather-prophet!" he decided, returning his glass to its case, then moving back through the bushes until he came to where his horse, a noble animal, black as midnight, strong and fleet, stood hitched to a sapling. "Steady, old boy!" with a loving caress in answer to that gentle whimper. "We may have to make a run for cover in a little, and it's just as well to be ready."

It was the work of only a few moments to secure the saddle in its proper place, and giving the intelligent animal another petting, Dandy Darling returned to his former post, again calling his glass into use.

Brief though his absence had been, some changes had taken place by the gully. Hiram Powell had crisply outlined the work before them, and the axmen, with John Clegg at their head, were already moving off in the direction of the timber island to cut new stringers.

The storm-cloud, too, was showing plainer, rising higher and spreading out on either hand. As yet it had escaped the observation of the Boomers, busy and troubled as they were, but, thanks to his more elevated position, Dandy Darling could see enough to cause him some little uneasiness on their account.

"Are they blind?" he muttered, frowningly, then sweeping his glass slowly over the field spread before him. "Will those infernal rascals try to take advantage, if a storm really is—Ha!"

He broke off with a sharp ejaculation, his glass becoming fixed as two slowly moving figures came within its field of vision: two women, beyond a doubt!

Only the upper portion of their figures could be detected above the rank grass, but Dandy Darling knew they could only have come from the wagon-train, and be more than suspected who at least one of them was: the same girl who was the unconscious cause of his being in Oklahoma that day.

"Is Uncle Hi mad, to let *her* stray so far from the wagons? What if he hasn't seen the storm coming? Is he a fool, not to suspect—he must know that there's ugly trouble brewing!"

He closed his glass and moved toward his waiting horse, as though resolved to mount and ride to warn the unsuspecting girls. Only to pause irresolutely, then return to his former position, gazing long and earnestly at the threatening cloud, trying to decide just what danger it portended.

The ending came sooner than he had anticipated, for the whirlwind shot out in advance of the cloud, at once betraying its comparatively harmless nature, yet making a display of force sufficient to hold his gaze and interest as it sped over the prairie, scattering its spray of harmless debris on all sides. Then—

He saw it strike the camp, seeming to swallow everything up, shutting out all objects from the breathless watcher for a full score of seconds before the aerial monster swept along in its course.

Even then the cloud of dust and torn grass obscured the demoralized camp, and even when the scattered fire-brands began to add black smoke to that artificial haze, Dandy Darling failed to recognize the startling truth; not until he caught sight of red flames springing up at a score or more distinct points.

A hoarse cry escaped his lips, and his glass was swiftly swept along in quest of those unsuspecting ramblers, a cold sweat starting out on his brow as he realized the frightful peril menacing them.

For a few moments his search was in vain, and he was just beginning to hope that they had returned to camp without his seeing them, when that was banished; he held one of the maidens in focus, and—

"God help you, if I fail, Lettice Acton!" he cried, hoarsely, springing toward his horse, the glass falling unheeded to the ground.

A score seconds later, Dandy Darling was dashing at reckless speed down the hill, heading direct for the point where he had caught a glimpse of the imperiled girl; only of her, for she seemed all alone!

But he had scarcely gained the level when he reined in, sharply, jerking out a revolver as he uttered a loud yell of indignation.

CHAPTER VI.

THE WORK OF THE FIREBUGS.

The slope was steep, the ground rough, thickly strewn with loose stones and covered with a sprinkle of scrubby bushes, the roots of which were quite as formidable as their stems.

For his own neck or bones, Dandy Darling cared but little and thought less, in those moments of intense excitement. For his good horse he was just as reckless, while a human life was in danger. But just because such a life was imperiled, the rider gave all his attention to guiding his gallant charger safely down to the level below.

Only for this, he would surely have made that ugly discovery sooner than he did, though he could hardly have been better prepared to meet it.

Less than one hundred yards from the base of the hill, and nearly in his track, a fire had sprung up since his rush to his horse!

And yonder flashed up another—and yet a third!

The ugly roar of the whirlwind was still filling the air, but his sharp cry of hot rage found ears to heed, and with yells of mingled alarm and anger, the dastardly firebugs whose nefarious work his coming had exposed, made a rush for cover, plunging into the rank grass and weeds before the detective could draw and use his weapons.

There were at least two of them, for through the settling dust and the growing smoke, Dandy Darling recognized that many; how many others were beyond, he neither knew nor cared as he charged with a shout!

Crack! Crack!

Spitefully their weapons rung forth, and by the spasmodic leap his horse gave at the sounds, Darling knew that at least one bullet had found an unlucky home!

That unsteady leap sent his own lead wide of the mark, for as he charged he opened fire on the covert into which the nearest figure had plunged. Back came other shots, and his head jerked to one side as he felt a sharp pain at one ear, much as though a wasp had stung him.

A whirling gust of wind sent the red flames shooting directly in front of his horse. The reins were hanging free. Each hand gripped a pistol-butt, everything forgotten for the moment but a burning desire to punish the dastardly firebugs as their crimes deserved. And once more Dandy Darling was foiled, for his horse flinched from the flames, leaping aside, half-turning to flee.

Hoarse, vicious cries came through the smoke as the firebugs saw this movement, and their shots came in swift succession as they broke cover, each one mounted on horseback.

"Kill him! Don't let the cussed critter git—look out!" yelled one of the knaves, abruptly changing his tune as Dandy Darling drove spurs deep into the quivering flanks of the black, sending him on once more in a fearless, reckless charge.

"Hold on, Johnny! it's only me!" cried Darling, firing a double shot as he charged.

"The Daisy Detective! Git, pardner!" hoarsely screamed one of the firebugs as he heard that ringing voice and caught a clearer glimpse of the prairie sport, thanks to an eddying gust sweeping aside the vail of smoke.

As he wheeled to flee, he cast a small round object backward. An explosion followed, and instantly a broad sheet of flame shot up directly in the path of the black horse.

Once more it shied violently, and once more its master's lead was wasted, just when he felt surest of his aim.

With a fierce snarl, Dandy Darling dropped the pistol from his left hand, catching it between the saddle and his thigh, then gripping the reins he sent the black in a sharp curve to the right, out of a line with the fire. Then—his eye as quick as his hand was steady—he covered one of the firebugs and pulled trigger.

The fellow flung up both hands and reeled in his seat, giving vent to a sharp screech of bitter agony. He suddenly dropped forward, only kept from falling out of the saddle by a clutch at the mane of his horse, and by the ready hand of his comrade, who urged both horses onward even while firing back at his dreaded antagonist.

Once more the swirling wind spread a vail of flame-tinged smoke between firebugs and avenger, and this served to recall Dandy Darling to a full sense of the peril which menaced the maiden on whose behalf he had begun that reckless dash.

"See you later, my hearty!" he sung out, sending a last shot through the smoke, though all view of the firebugs was shut out for the time being.

Wheeling his horse, Dandy Darling put up his pistols, having no time to waste in recharging them just then.

Already the flames had spread to a sickening extent, driven onward by the brisk wind, which seemed to be growing stronger with each passing instant.

Again those spurs tasted of blood. No time now for mercy to man or beast! A life far more precious might depend on the gain of a single second!

On, past the point where he had caught his first glimpse of the firebugs at work. On, a hundred yards further. Yet here the flames were roaring and crackling, sending out tongues of fire in search of fresh food. On, still further, then swaying to the right and dashing straight through—was it only smoke, sent in advance of the flames?

Still on, though the black horse snorted with terror and pain, leaping high like a frightened buck in starting from danger. On, through rank grass that leaped into flames with their passage, as though the fire had crept along below the surface, to be cast up by those madly plunging hoofs!

"Through it—thank Heaven!" gasped Dandy Darling, brushing a hand across his smarting eyes, filled with smoke and flying cinders.

There was a clear space of a few rods, and though smoke ahead cut his range of vision short, Darling had kept his sense of locality clear, and now headed direct for the point where he had caught his last glimpse of the endangered maidens; for though his glass had shown him but one figure, he never doubted but that both girls were still in company.

It took hardly longer than the span of a single breath to carry them across that clear space, but then a cry of mingled rage and almost despair burst from the lips of the bold rider; for here again their path was barred by spreading flames!

What could it all mean? Was this but the work of the whirlwind, or were there still other firebugs engaged in spreading the fire?

Almost involuntarily Dandy Darling asked himself these questions, while wrenching up his frightened horse as they came face to face with that new barrier to his hopes.

How far that line of fire extended, he could only surmise, for the smoke was spreading over the bottoms like a black pall, circumscribing his vision already, and threatening to extinguish it entirely in a few moments more.

"She's there—and she's lost without speedy aid!" he cried to himself, taking a resolution so desperate that all but the bravest of the brave must have shrunk from it in horror.

Tearing off his cowboy neckerchief—of heavy silk, and nearly large enough when full spread to cover a table—Dandy Darling swiftly folded it, then leaned forward and bound it securely over the eyes of his horse, using his voice to soothe the terrified creature, his muscular legs to hold it steadily facing those roaring flames.

This occupied only a very brief space of time, but under such circumstances, every second counts for an age, and when Dandy Darling could once more look at the situation, it was enough to daunt almost any man.

"All the same—I'm going through—or die trying!" he cried, almost viciously, spurring his horse along the edge of the fire for a few yards, then heading him straight for the barricade, where the glow seemed less intense.

Bowing his head low, covering his face with his broad hat, shielding both hands by pressing them between his waist and the saddle, the desperate fellow drove his spurs savagely home, sending the blinded black plunging through the flames!

It seemed like plunging into the midst of a glowing furnace. The flames shot up, completely blanketing both horse and rider, and though his garments were all of woolen, and thus in a measure proof, during that brief space Dandy Darling felt as though they were being eaten away, taking his skin along to keep them company!

Completely blinded, and wholly helpless save for those wicked spurs and the firm reins, the pain-maddened horse tore through the fire, all at once crossing its furthest limits, stumbling over the rank growth of heat-parching grass, saved from falling only by that steel-muscled arm bearing on the bit.

Not until then did Dandy Darling lift his head or dare try to draw a fresh breath. But now, as he saw a comparatively clear field before him—no fire, and but little smoke in comparison with what he had just passed through—his lungs filled afresh, to send forth a clear, far-reaching call:

"Lettice! Lettice Acton! Speak—I've come to save you!"

No answer; only the ominous roar of the flames and the crackling of weeds as their stems burst from accumulating gasses! Only the hollow wailing of the wind as it eddied above his head.

"Lettice! Lettice Acton!"

Time and time again he sent up that cry as he urged his blinded steed forward, now to the right, now to the left, then straight ahead.

"Lettice! Answer—for God's sake! where are you, Lettice?"

The cruel smoke swoops down as the heated wind eddies more swiftly, covering him as with a gloomy pall. It is almost as though midnight had taken the place of noonday!

He felt that he could not be far astray in his belief that somewhere near here he had caught his last glimpse of the maiden in whose behalf he had risked his own life. Oh, for but a minute's clear view!

"Lettice! Oh, Lettice Acton!"

His voice was hoarse and unnatural. His lungs were choked with acrid smoke, and the growing heat—like that of a furnace, dry and enfeebling—seemed to be drying, shriveling them up to nothing!

Once again he shouted at the top of his voice, and—surely that was an answer? Faint—choking—from whence?

Desperately he wrenched up his horse, glaring painfully around, his view cut short by that dense smoke. If it would only rise for—

As though in answer to his unfinished prayer, there came a sudden whirl of wind, feeling cool and refreshing by contrast with the air he had been breathing, and then—back rolled the smoke-clouds, leaving him a clear view ahead where—

A wild cry burst from his parched throat as he urged his horse onward, trying to clear his eyes of the cinders and dust that clogged their workings. For—thank Heaven!

"Lettice! I've found you, at last!"

"Help—save—"

Only a head and arm showing above the rank growth of grass, and that but for a few seconds; but it was enough! Dandy Darling recognized the face and faltering voice of the maiden whom he had come through fire to rescue, and an instant later he was at her side.

He leaped from the saddle, all fatigue, all pains forgotten in that glad discovery, and though Lettice sunk back, half-swooning, before his eager hands could touch her, she was quickly caught up in his arms.

"I began to fear I'd never find you my—Miss Acton!" he panted, as he turned toward his trembling horse, swinging her into the saddle with as much care as he could show where moments were so very precious. "But now—hang fast—he'll carry you safe through to the river!"

Even as he spoke, a dull red smear across the back of one hand caught his eye, and for an instant his leaping heart threatened to choke him, for he believed Lettice had been seriously hurt. Then he saw the blood flowing from the breast of his horse, and remembered. More—he wondered if the poor creature could bear them both to safety?

The smoke was settling again, but he had time to make a hasty examination. No! One must remain as a sacrifice to the other!

CHAPTER VII.

LOVE MAKES THE MAN.

BRIEF though its lingering had been, the whirlwind worked considerable damage at the camp of the Big Buffalo Boomers, apart from that unfortunate scattering of firebrands.

Such of the wagons as caught its full force, were stripped of their canvas tilts, one or two of those given over to the carriage of women and children being overturned by the swirling force, or else run off across the level until out of range of the windy tower.

The flying shower of debris, added to the ugly roar of the wind itself, frightened the picketed animals, causing them to snort and rear, tugging at their fastenings until something had to give way.

When the whirlwind was fairly upon them, an almost general stampede took place, the horses dashing away with frightened snorts and shrill neighings.

Thanks to their being sheltered by the timber, and having their view obstructed by the surrounding trees with the ringing sound of their sturdily-plied axes drowning the growing muttering of the storm, John Clegg and his fellows were more nearly taken by surprise than those of the Boomers left to work by the broken bridge.

They had barely warning enough to rush to the edge of the timber, there to watch the windy column as it swept past, only the skirts of the whirlwind touching them, though dirt and sticks and grass fell all about in a dense shower, adding to their natural fears—more for the safety of their loved ones at camp than for themselves.

Coming so suddenly, giving such a roaring, its dimensions magnified many fold by the flying debris, it can hardly be wondered at that the too-familiar cry of "cyclone!" broke from the choppers.

Despite the dust that filled their eyes and stung their faces so sharply, they could see that the column was bearing direct for the camp where their women and children were left without even such frail and dangerous cover as growing timber to cower under; and the moment they could make their way against those wildly whirling currents of air, the axmen dropped their tools and set out in a dead run for camp.

They were too late to check the stampede, but during those first few moments of speechless joy those who had wives and children among the company had thoughts for nothing else.

"Whar's your gal? Whar's Letty, Uncle Hi?" asked John Clegg, grasping the wagon boss by an arm, glaring around in quest of—not her whose name he uttered, but one whose safety was ten thousand fold more precious to his heart.

Then it was that Hiram Powell called upon his adopted child; then it was that, with the

scattered firebrands performing their dread work with sickening rapidity, the answer came which seemed to paralyze the sturdy veteran:

"In the track o' the fire—God pity 'em!"

Even stout-hearted John Clegg staggered before that blow, taking one shivering glance at the widening line of fire, now nearly complete as the ruddy tongues leaped out toward each other, licking up the dry grass with hungry fury, forcing their way back in the teeth of the wind, menacing even the camp itself.

One glance, then his trembling hands flew up to shut out the awful vision; not of the fire itself, but of what the flames would soon be doing to the girl he loved with all the force of his rugged nature.

"Fight the fire! Stomp it out! Everybody—*fight fire!*"

In their own peril, that of the missing ones was forgotten for the moment by nearly all, and despite the demoralization left behind by the whirlwind, those loud commands were promptly responded to. And as by magic the Boomers—women and children as well as men—fell to work, past experience teaching them just what to do and how to do it.

It was well that each man could act as leader in such an emergency, for neither Powell nor Clegg attempted to fill their accustomed roles. The wagon boss was stunned by that terrible discovery, and swayed like a drunken man on his feet, as he stared blankly into that crackling mass of flames.

John Clegg seemed fully as much overcome, but only for a brief space. Then, with a hoarse, choking cry, almost a roar, he turned and dashed off toward the spot where he had picketed out his horses when the word to form camp was given.

One of the spans was gone with the stampede, but of the half dozen animals who had failed to break trail-ropes or pull up picket-pins, his strongest, best horse formed one.

He jerked out his knife as he ran, and severing the lariat with a swift slash, Clegg fairly dragged the frightened animal back to the wagon where his harness had been left, using only a few seconds in fastening a bridle in place.

"Cuss the wagons," he hoarsely cried, seeing how desperately the Boomers were fighting the flames. "Thar's lives in danger! Ketch up an' help save the gals, ef you're anythin' like white men!"

The man nearest him stopped work long enough to point at the wall of flames rolling along down the bottoms.

That was answer enough, surely.

"We cain't help 'em—an' Fred Acton's with 'em, too!" half sulkily called out another of the Boomers.

"Fred!" burst from those scornful lips, as Clegg sprung upon the back of his horse. "He's wuss than no man at all!"

Using the fragment of lariat as a whip, the desperate Boomer drove his horse straight for the wall of fire, knowing that all was lost unless he could force a passage at the nearest point. To attempt to skirt the flames on one side would almost surely cause a fatal delay; on the other, the deep gully effectually barred the way.

Twice he forced the snorting animal close to the flames, and twice he was driven back against his will, the eddying wind swirling the blazing grass fairly into the face of the horse.

"You've got to—got to!" fairly howled the half-crazed Boomer, raining blows upon the poor creature. "I'll save her, or—on, ye devil!"

Once more human will conquered brute fear, and as John Clegg forced his steed forward, a bank of black smoke fortunately came down over those fear-inspiring flames, briefly blotting them out, so far as sight was concerned. Then—a fierce plunge into the crackling furnace—a fiery bath that threatened annihilation—a short series of terrified leaps, and out the couple shot into the as yet unignited grass!

"Git, now!" hoarsely cried John Clegg, using heels and rope to urge his steed to greater speed. "It's run or roast, old fellow!"

He said this, as he cleared his eyes of smoke sufficient to enable him to take in the full measure of the deadly peril into which love had plunged him.

The whirlwind had done its work only too well. The scattered brands and living coals had set the dry grass afire in dozens of different spots, and these, under the brisk breeze, were rapidly spreading, in many places having already drawn together, forming a solid wall of flames.

Only in front and to the right of the Boomer was the grass as yet untouched. How long would that be?

The wind, increasing with the heat of the fire below, was catching up bunches of blazing grass, whirling them far away, terrible meteors which might at any moment form another grim barrier for him to fight against!

Even those who had known him longest and most intimately, had never thought bluff John Clegg was shaped in heroic mold, but now the hour of trial had come, and it did not find him lacking.

"She's thar—she needs us—gid-ap!"

Only those words, and he hardly knew they were spoken aloud. The thought filled his heart and he acted upon it.

The frightened horse, already scorched and seared by a fiery bath, needed no urging to keep at top speed, though the desperate Boomer used heels and rope unsparingly in his fierce excitement.

He never cast a look back at the roaring flames. He never gave a thought to his own peril, just then. He strained his eyes to catch the first possible glimpse of Christine Brockelmyer. He had thoughts only for her, the woman he loved, and never once remembered that others were menaced with the same hideous fate.

Loudly he shouted her name, straining his powerful lungs to the utmost, feeling a curious wonder that his voice sounded so weak, so husky; it seemed to fall dead on the hot air, without ring or echo!

There was no time to pick his path, even if his frightened horse could have been kept in one of those narrow, winding trails where the rank growth had been flattened down. Right on, trusting to his love-sharpened sight not to pass Christine by unseen, yet using his voice to send forth her name, over and over again.

His horse was big and powerful, and terror lent it unusual speed. For some minutes they fairly out-ran the flames, despite the hampering grass through which the horse plowed its way, too heavily built, too thick-limbed to cover the ground as a deer runs.

It was killing work, by no means lessened as the black, acrid smoke came swirling along in advance of the flames, thickening the air they were forced to breathe, darkening their way, dimming the view ahead, just when John Clegg felt the greatest need of unobstructed vision.

"She couldn't 'a' come much furder'n this!" he hoarsely panted, savagely clearing his smarting eyes as he repeated that loved name: "Christine! O h-h Christine!"

He caught a sound—was it a pistol-shot?

Again he shouted at the top of his voice, prolonging the cry until a red blur filled his eyes and his brain throbbed as though it would split his skull wide open.

The smoke fell over him like a blanket, and the panting horse plunged heavily on, running blindly, spurred on more by fear of those terrible flames than the urging of its half-crazed master.

Louder roared the flames behind them. The weeds burst their stalks in sharp reports, like the distant discharge of musketry. The heat grew more intense—the very atmosphere seemed on fire!

Yet on the Boomer urged his horse, with only one thought, only one end in view: to find Christine, and die in her company if rescue was beyond his bodily powers. They might fail him—his heart—never!

"Christine! Speak—whar be ye?"

"Yohn! Here! Oh, Yohn Clegg!"

Faint, indistinct, coming against the heated wind, yet not to be mistaken for aught else—the longed-for voice! The voice of Christine Brockelmyer! The voice of the girl whom he loved never so dearly, never so madly as now, when death threatened them both in awful shape!

"Christine! I've come fer—hyar, my pritty!" panted Clegg, jerking up his horse with resistless power, reaching down a hand as he caught sight of the woman, half buried in the rank grass.

He caught a hand, and tried to swing its owner to the withers of his horse, but Christine hung back, a dead weight, a sharp cry parting her smoke-blackened lips, a look of agony on her face.

"Yohn—I can't help—"

She sunk back so suddenly that the Boomer was almost jerked from his insecure seat, and their hands separated as the fear-crazed animal tried to break away in flight.

"Whoa, ye devil!" savagely jerking him up, then crying hoarsely as he sprung to the ground: "I'll lift ye on--whoa, ye—"

With a mad plunge the horse broke away, its bridle snapping at the throat, coming away in the fierce grasp of its master. Clegg made one wild bound, a single desperate effort to catch the brute—to fail!

The next instant the animal vanished amidst the heavy smoke, and John Clegg stood helpless by the side of the woman whom he would have given his life to preserve.

"No use, little gal," he hoarsely cried, with a short, reckless laugh. "Waal, we kin die in comp'ny, anyway! An' I'd ruther hev that then life 'ithout you to keep me comp'ny—Christine!"

"No, no! better as dose—we liff for each the odder, Yohn!" cried Christine, rising up and flinging her arms about his neck.

CHAPTER VIII.

A TONGUE THAT RAN TOO FREELY.

FOR a moment John Clegg stood like one petrified. If he heard her broken words, he did not at once drink in their meaning. He only knew that the woman he loved with all the fervor of his strong nature, was voluntarily embracing him—her arms about his neck, her

form clinging to his, her face so near that, even through the heat of the coming fire, he could feel her quick breath fanning his cheek.

Those glorious blue eyes—bluer, brighter, more lovely than ever, he fancied, despite the smoke and dust that marred her fair skin. They were fixed upon his with—was it love?

A shiver shook his muscular form as that wild fancy flashed across his whirling brain. A mad temptation seized upon him. His strong arms closed about that plump figure, pressing it closer: but there he stopped, for the instant.

Instead of pressing his parched lips to hers, so temptingly nigh, John Clegg whirled her half-around, bringing her face toward the approaching flames, now so nigh that the ruddy glare was visible through the rolling waves of stifling smoke.

"Does that look like livin', Christine?" he huskily panted, throwing out one hand toward the fiery wave, then clasping her still more tightly to his bosom, while crying loud enough for her to hear above that tumult of sounds: "But I'd ruther die *this* way—with you, pritty!"

Then his lips touched hers in his first kiss of love!

That caress was returned—it made him fairly drunk to know as much! Once—twice—then Christine drew back her head, both hands pressed against his chest to hold his lips at bay while she cried:

"You do loaf me, Yohn—my Yohn?"

"Hain't I proved it, Christine?" with a grim smile.

"Den—liff, my Yohn! Liff for me! Come! Dis vay, und—"

In her excitement Christine's voice rose almost to a shriek, but the flames were approaching rapidly, and to linger longer meant almost certain death for both.

With a power that made the Boomer wonder, even then, she caught his arm and dragged him away, crying out some words that he failed to distinguish.

He yielded to her impulse, and the next instant they were running along a narrow trail which was to lead them to—what?

Even as he asked himself this question, Clegg tripped and would have fallen, only for the firm grip which Christine kept on his wrist.

The smoke swooped down upon them, blinding their sight. A wave of heat bore it company, and the Boomer uttered a choking cry as he felt that the flames were surely about to envelop them both. But—

"Here—a hole—come in, Yohn!" screamed Christine from out the blackness through which they were blindly fighting their way.

He struck his instinctively bended head against a rock, or hard bank. Even then he might have been lost, only for Christine, who kept her wits most marvelously for a woman, in the face of such awful peril.

Her free hand closed over his shaggy poll—his hat had been lost during that mad ride—and actually dragged his head and broad shoulders into a narrow opening: after that, the rest was easy.

"Quick! Stop up the hole!" cried Christine, close to his ringing ears. "We choke—dot smoke must be out keepen!"

With a prospect of escape, the brain of the Boomer began to clear again, and as he caught a glimpse of the hole through which they had passed, outlined by the ruddy glare of the fire, he fell to work with something of his old-time energy.

Christine was moving a heavy fragment of rock toward the opening, and he caught this from her hands, giving a glad cry as he found it more than half barred the way.

"We will live, Christine!" he cried, joyously.

"An' you saved—"

"Vork now—talk later, Yohn!" screamed the woman in response.

They did work, both of them, knowing that though they might escape the flames, they would surely be suffocated by the terrible smoke unless the opening could be closed in time.

A few more stones were piled up, then dirt was scooped from the sides of the little den and plastered between. Clegg tore off his heavy outside shirt of wool, to complete the job, not until all was well secured daring to pause even for an instant to see how well the task had been accomplished.

"It is better as outside, anyvay, Yohn!" laughed Christine, after they had tested the atmosphere within their refuge. "We can bear it—each odder by, nein?"

Clegg groped about in the darkness until his arms found the prize he sought. And then, close together, her head bowed upon his breast, they waited the end.

The air was close, laden with smoke, and heated uncomfortably, even when contrasted with what they had endured while outside. The roaring of the fire was deadened to a degree by the opening being closed, but the noise was still too great for conversation without screaming at the top of their voices.

All this helped to keep them silent while awaiting the end. And, no matter what Christine may have felt, John Clegg was too dizzily happy

to feel like talking, even to the object of his worship.

Christine had as good as confessed her love for him, when death seemed inevitable. She had hugged him of her own free will. His lips had pressed hers, and hers had kissed him in return.

There was only one drawback to his bliss: instead of his saving her, as he had hoped, Christine had preserved his life. Only for her, he would now be but a blackened, seared, hideous lump of mortality, instead of being here, his arms about her yielding form, her head resting so peacefully on his bosom!

How long that dizzy, intoxicating dream lasted, John Clegg never fairly knew; he would never have broken it, of his own accord.

But Christine seemed less at ease, and was the one to first break the silence which had fallen upon their tongues.

"Yohn, I think me it would be safe—I vhas chokking in here!"

She broke away from his arms, and tore down the shirt from over the closed opening. She brushed away a portion of the dried dirt, and removed one of the smaller stones, to utter a joyful cry as she saw that the fire had indeed swept over and far beyond their refuge.

"It is not die, but *liff*, Yohn Clegg," she cried, with a strangely sounding laugh, doubtless due to their contracted quarters. "Help me, Yohn! Bull me dese—make 'em down, my fine Yohnny boy!"

Her wish was promptly carried out; it would have been, had a sheet of fire barred the opening. He was her slave from that hour.

Christine would have sprung through the opening, only for his gently restraining hand.

"Don't—the ground'll scorch your pritty feet, Christine!"

"Und den, I fear me I see—Yohn," half-whimperingly said the young woman, shrinking back from the opening: "You see notting of—of Letty Acton?"

The Boomer gave a great start, turning pale even through his thick coating of smoke and grime. Until that instant he had forgotten all about both Lettice and her brother; forgot everything save Christine.

"No, I didn't—she isn't in here?" he muttered, casting a quick glance backward, even as he spoke learning that they alone occupied that little refuge.

Christine made no immediate response. She bowed her face in her hands, rocking back and forth, moaning faintly, seemingly too deeply grieved to cry aloud as women cry at trifles.

John Clegg wanted to comfort her, but he did not know how to set about it. Until this day, he had looked upon women as only children of taller growth, rather beneath the notice of men when in "a tantrum" of this sort. Now—he could only wait, and let the storm pass over.

Perhaps he was wiser than he knew in so acting, for Christine was not long in regaining her usual composure, at least to outward seeming.

And then, without waiting to be questioned, she told the story of her adventures up to the moment when, cowering in this little den, her ears caught the doubly welcome sound of his manly voice calling aloud her name.

There is no need to give her words in detail, for, considering all she had passed through, her account was remarkably free from errors; unless when she spoke more particularly of Fred Acton and his doings.

Then her voice grew a bit harder, and though she spoke with only a slight accent, making far fewer slips than she customarily did when at all excited, her blue eyes fairly shone through the gloom which reigned there in the little den.

"I lost sight of Lettice, long before the fire came," she said, speaking low and rapidly. "It was his fault—I can pity, but I can me not so soon forgive! He would talk of his loaf—I could neffer shut him off, Yohn!"

John Clegg clinched his hands and his teeth. He believed that Fred Acton was dead, and he could not well curse a corpse. Only for that—if he was still alive!

"I told him I could not loaf him back, Yohn," resumed Christine, after a brief silence, during which she sat staring out through the entrance, though there was an unseeing look in her wide-open blue eyes.

"I said how my mother marry a man like him: a boy-man! I tell him how she liff a love-slave all her lifetime; how she haft to be the worker and the vinner of bread; how she wear her life out all by that boy-man-husband! And so—I say me no! neffer! I can me not loaf such as you! I wants me a true man—a man like—like!"

"Who, like who, Christine?"

"Like—I'll his picture show you—when I win one, Yohn," she smiled, flashing those blue eyes briefly upon his eager face, then waving him back as he started forward in his eagerness. "Wait: it is too soon, already, Yohn! And—I haft more to say, yet a little!"

So she had; too much, perhaps, knowing as she surely must what deep jealousy those two men had felt on her account.

"I told him who was a man, not a boy-man. And he make a sneer; he, him own self, was worth more as dwent such as my choice! I laugh, but he grow more mad. He would broof

me all he say and—then the smoke and fire come oafer us both!"

She told how they sought for Lettice until the smoke blinded them and the heat grew unbearable. She told how they ran on in the seemingly vain hope of reaching the far-away river, or of finding some nearer refuge, they knew not what. Then—

"He run away, leaving you, to save his own dirty lifel" savagely broke in John Clegg, his evil passions getting the upper hand.

"Hush! he vhas—maybe he vhas no longer alife, Yohn," gently murmured Christine, a hand touching his rigid arm.

"If he is—if he pulled through safe, and I ever meet up with him, I'll—"

"Hush, I say you vonce again, Yohn!" a little more sharply. "He did lose me—or I lose me him—but it vhas so dark, so hot, so awful all oafer! And then—Yohn, I vhas running so fast as I could, in fear dose fires of, when—I see me just a little while, a man! He vhas running like me—only not the same way I go. I call out but he neffer stop, neffer say me no answer back! And—Yohn?"

"What is it, Christine?"

"I lose me sight of that man, right away quick. But—then—I hear me a shoot-gun go off!"

"What! You think—"

"No! no! I can't think me any, eafen yet!" covering her eyes and shivering violently for an instant or two. "I run me on, and when I had hope given up, I finds me this blace. I creep the hole in, and I try to think I will not die—so soon, anyway! Then—I know me nothing more until I hear me your voice cry out where I am gone to."

"Then you run out and saved my life, little angel," huskily muttered Clegg, his eyes growing dim after a fashion long foreign to his rugged nature.

Christine no longer sought to avoid his embrace, and together they sat in silence for many minutes, listening to the increasing of the rainfall which had begun while Christine was telling her story. A silence that was finally broken by the echo of shots and shouts outside.

CHAPTER IX.

THROUGH THE FLAMES.

THERE was no time to spare for making a more critical examination, but Dandy Darling had already seen enough to feel fairly certain that the wounded black could not hold out long enough to bear them both to the river, forcing its way through the rank growth of grass, and fighting against the intense heat and stifling smoke as well.

Life was fully as dear to him as to any man, but he never hesitated an instant when it came to a question of sacrifice. Instead of leaping up behind the saddle, as had been his intention, he tried to force the reins into Lettice Acton's hands, hurriedly adding:

"The river's ahead—try to ride straight on! Keep him going, no matter what you see before you, for— Go! to linger is death!"

Instead of being gripped by, the reins fell from her trembling fingers as he left them. Only for the muffler over its eyes, the terrified horse would surely have dashed away, leaving its master to death, if not giving him a companion in torture, by unseating poor Lettice.

"I can't—don't—I'm afraid!" gasped the unnerved girl, kept only from falling by Dick's quick support.

There was no time to argue, no time to coax or scold or do aught but act. Lacking nerve and the power to struggle desperately for her life, Lettice was surely lost if sent away alone. No worse fate could possibly befall her through his keeping company until—

Hardly half a minute in all had been lost by that halt, yet their peril was terribly increased.

The roaring of flames, the crackling of weeds, the curious whirring and snapping sound given forth by tongues of fire as they come together, all sound clearer and more distinct. The heat seemed to redouble its power, and then the black smoke came swirling along, heavily laden with ashes and cinders and glowing bits of grass, bringing far worse than gloom of midnight upon its wings.

Dandy Darling had barely time to fix in his brain what he believed must be the direct course to the river, before all objects but his horse and his helpless companion in peril were blotted out by that hideous pall.

"Hold fast, if you love life!" he cried, hoarsely, obliged to relax his supporting grasp for an instant, during which he leaped upon the trembling black, behind the saddle.

Lettice swayed dizzily as the horse gave a swerve, and she would have fallen to the ground only for the deft grasp of her protector.

It was a hug, rather than an aid, but then was no time for idle ceremony; the flames were leaping toward them, and already their hopes of escape seemed worse than vain.

Blinding though the smoke was, Dandy Darling contrived to secure the reins and keep their mount headed in the right direction, urging him on with voice and heel, knowing that to fail or falter now meant certain destruction.

The pall of smoke and cinders seemed to keep

them company, frantically as the noble black ran with its double burden. Thicker and more oppressive it grew, shutting out all vision, forcing the fugitives to close their eyelids tightly, though the efforts caused them exquisite pain.

Yet through it all, one picture stood out before Dandy Darling's eyes with strange distinctness; that of the firebugs leaping up from cover, firing the shots, one of which had torn that hole in the chest of his good horse.

Only that picture! He could not banish it. He could not drive away the curses which revolved in his brain—curses upon the weapon out of which that missile sped, on the hand that held the pistol, the eye that aimed the weapon, the man who owned and controlled them all!

For he knew that with such a loss of blood, no mortal creature could much longer bear up under such a terrible strain. And with each passing moment he expected to feel the inevitable collapse. And expecting this, he sought to recall or devise some method by which the precious life of this poor girl might be saved.

Only to have that picture dance before his closed eyes—only to be forced through with the same train of fancy once more!

Over and over again, through what seemed an eternity, though the reality could have been crowded inside of a single minute.

Then, just as he was ceasing to fight against that maddening repetition, losing his bodily powers with the mental decline, a breath as of heaven came full in their faces!

A choking cry escaped his parched lips, and he opened his eyes, to have them filled with a blurr of what seemed intense brightness that drew tears of pain from their tear-ducks.

"Courage, Letty!" he cried, hope reviving as he found he could fill his lungs with comparatively cool and pure air once more, at the same time rapidly winking to aid his eyes in regaining at least a portion of their wonted clearness of sight. "Here's the river, and—"

He broke off with a sound that was fully as much curse as groan.

He could see enough to realize what a false hope he had grasped.

True, the smoke-cloud had lifted, or been swirled away by the wind, leaving them a comparatively delicious atmosphere; but for how long?

Instead of the river, right ahead of them lay a line of fire, biding all that might be beyond!

With that terrible discovery, Dandy Darling regained a goodly measure of his natural nerve and clearness of wit. He wrenched up his horse, keeping firm hold of Lettice the while, to guard against her being unseated. He cast a swift, comprehensive glance around them, trying to sum up the chances both for and against them.

They seemed to be surrounded by flames on all sides but one.

To the left, he failed to see any fire, though the rolling waves of smoke might be hiding it; yet he did not cast a second glance toward that quarter.

One was enough! It showed him how rapidly the flames on either hand were drawing together, and to be caught between those walls of fire would be certain annihilation, rendered all the more horrible by the minute of torture granted them in which to fight against the inevitable.

No! if there was any hope at all, it lay in keeping straight onward, through the wall of fire which barred their way, to the river!

The river? Was it straight ahead? Had he been able to keep anything like a true course? Had they not veered aside, even made a circle, during that awful period of blindness?

Dandy Darling fought back those terrible doubts. If true, they could not be bettered. If false, entertaining them could only lessen his nerve—and heaven knows he required it all just then!

There was no time for speech or explanation; already the flames were crowding them from the rear, even as they were menaced in front. Whatever was done, must be done quickly, or all was in vain.

Dandy Darling caught at the skirt of Lettice's dress, wrapping it about her head and neck as well as he could with one hand, then bending over to shield her with his own body as much as possible, he slackened rein and urged the black steed onward once more.

Straight for that wall of fire! Direct into the jaws of death!

So it seemed, after the inspection he had taken during those few seconds of waiting. So it felt, when the blinded horse, with a wild snort of terror and pain, plunged fairly into the flames!

It was do or die now!

Dandy Darling no longer gripped the reins. If the horse should trip or stumble, all was lost in spite of what aid his arm could lend.

His armed heels savagely raked those steaming, bleeding flanks. His free hand madly, as blindly, fought the flames that curled about the half-swooning girl whom he was trying to save from a terrible death.

It was a baptism of fire, such as few have passed through without also passing to another shore, and even Dandy Darling began to yield, when—thank God!

The black horse made another spasmodic

bound, then fell—not into the flames, not upon the parching grass, but over the crumbling bank of the river, into water that seemed icy cold after that passage of flames!

The heavy shock tore Lettice from his grasp, and partially unseated Darling himself, but as his head and face struck the water, the second shock cleared his brain and lent him fresh strength.

"Lettie! where are you?" he cried, his parched throat relieved by that involuntary swallow of cool water.

He kicked his feet out of the stirrups and flung himself toward—yes! it was Lettice, just sinking below the surface, yet alive, as her feeble struggling proclaimed!

Before she could sink, one of his arms was around her waist, lifting her head out of the water, bringing it against his shoulder as he turned about to look for his horse.

Its head and withers were showing above the surface, as though its feet were at least touching bottom, but the desperate struggles the poor creature was making told only too plain a story.

"Caught!—in the quicksand!" gasped Darling, as the truth flashed upon his brain.

Almost instinctively he had turned toward shore the instant his arm passed around the form of his companion. When he saw that the horse was not afloat, but touching bottom, his own feet dropped down, touching the sands just as he made that ugly discovery.

He felt the slippery particles quiver beneath his touch, lightly though his toes had scraped against them; they seemed to quiver, to shake and shiver and crawl as though instinct with life!

That alone would have been sufficient to warn him of peril, but with the frantic struggles of his poor horse before his eyes, Darling gave a choking cry of fear, and desperately pushed away from land!

The cool bath was rapidly doing its work, and with each passing breath Darling was rallying his strength, his nerve, his powers of reasoning. And now he began to take in the situation as it really was.

The river at this point formed a huge eddy, the waters slowly flowing in contrary directions, so that the couple were passing up-stream instead of down.

The afternoon had passed, the sun must have set, though a portion of this gloom was occasioned by the vast quantity of black smoke, thrown off by the burning of green grass with the dry.

Here and there was an open rift, but for the most part the smoke hung in curling waves close to the water, in places dense enough to limit the view to a few feet.

Although the roaring of the conflagration was distinctly audible, it was less at this low level, and beyond a doubt the greater part of the fire had passed on down the bottoms.

All this Dandy Darling took in at a single glance, and he was still vigorously swimming away from the shore, where death in still another shape lay in wait for them, when he caught sight of a floating object swinging with the eddy, only a few yards distant.

A second look revealed its nature, and with a glad ejaculation, he changed his course, quickly gaining this new goal: a single stick of driftwood, but quite sufficient to support them both.

The relief thus afforded was very timely; not for himself, but for his companion, who had hardly struggled, hardly given a sign of life since his supporting arm prevented her from sinking below the surface.

The next few minutes were full of anxiety for Dandy Darling, for he began to fear that, after all his fighting the flames, all his efforts in her behalf, Lettice Acton had come to her death!

There were several ends of broken limbs protruding from the tree-trunk, and utilizing these, he managed to lift Lettice nearly out of the water, supporting himself alongside while striving to restore her to consciousness.

So far as he could ascertain in the growing darkness, she had not been seriously injured by that fiery baptism, and learning this, he began to hope that her faintness was only the result of fright and over-exertion; that she lived, her throbbing heart plainly proved.

All at once her head lifted, and Lettice gasped:

"Brother! come—here I am!"

CHAPTER X. VOICES OUT OF THE NIGHT.

TEN seconds earlier, Dandy Darling would have welcomed that voice as one of the greatest possible boons, but now one hand shot out and closed over her lips, pressing Lettice back with gentle force, at the same time sinking his own form deeper into the water.

The same voice that had startled the maiden from her partial swoon, came to his ears, but he placed a far different interpretation upon it. Lettice fancied that it was her brother calling to her; he remembered his brief encounter with the firebugs, and more than half believed the speaker was one of the allies, if not one of that same couple!

He had not caught the words spoken, but he knew they came from shore, most likely from some covert under the high bank, where a refuge from the flames had been found.

"For your life, don't cry out, Miss Acton!" he whispered, his lips close to the ear of the feebly struggling maiden as their drift slowly floated up with the eddy. "It's not your brother, but your worst enemy!"

Lettice ceased struggling, but whether because she understood his warning, or through returning weakness, Dandy Darling could only guess: he dared not attempt to discover, as yet, for just then, that voice—or another—came indistinctly through the night.

"What the—howlin'—eh?"

Those were the only words he could catch clearly to recognize, but they were quite sufficient to convince him that whoever might be the speaker, it certainly was not Fred Acton.

"Didn't ye hear—spashin' like—"

The voices came from a point further up the river, and the eddy was slowly drifting them closer to the spot where the speakers were hidden by the smoke and the growing darkness of early night.

Dandy Darling could distinguish the bank, here rising some eight or ten feet above the water, the tiny waves of which almost lapped the lower edge of the steep, ragged slope, there being but little if anything in the shape of shore or beach.

He strained his eyes in vain to make out any motionless or moving figures, but that hardly lessened his new fears: with the river at their back, they would be far more easily seen by those on land, in case their suspicions should be directed that way.

The drift itself would pass unnoticed, but if Lettice should cry out, or attempt to rise up again, discovery would almost surely follow.

Only for his adventure with the firebugs, Dandy Darling would not have lost a second in delay before shouting loudly for assistance, even though he knew that the Big Buffalo Boomers had many unscrupulous enemies in that section. Recalling that encounter, brought about by his interruption of their dastardly work, he dared not call out, even for Lettice Acton's sake.

"Catfish—for a smoke!" came the broken reply, ending with a coarse, jeering laugh that no honest man would be guilty of.

Lettice was beginning to stir, and slipping an arm over her breast to grip a jagged knot beyond, Dandy Darling covered her lips with his other hand, sinking the log as low as his added weight would bring it, he whispered in slow, impressive tones:

"Your brother is safe, Miss Acton, but he is not talking—he is not on shore, here. Those are your enemies, and part of those who started the fire to-day! I beg of you—"

He was compelled to use actual force to keep the maiden from crying out, though he was gentle as he dared to be.

"For my sake, if not for your own, I beg you to lie quiet!" Darling added, his lips brushing her ear in his wish to make her comprehend, yet without raising his voice loud enough for the water to convey the sounds to the unseen beings on land. "I saved you from the fire. Will you repay me by giving me over to those devils—to death?"

Had only his own welfare been at stake, Dandy Darling could never have brought himself to make such a miserable appeal. As it was, his face fairly burned with shame, even though it was all through fear for her that he uttered the words. Still, she could not know as much, and, somehow, the good opinion of Lettice Acton had grown very precious in his estimation of late.

Lettice ceased her struggles, lying quiet under his arm. He hoped she understood—no! better if she had returned to her former state of semi-unconsciousness, for then she would not think him such a cur!

For the first time since that fire broke forth, Dandy Darling felt thankful for the black smoke left behind by the burning grass. It came creeping along over the water, writhing like some score of sluggish serpents, by degrees shutting out the shore entirely.

Though it cut off sight, it proved no barrier to sound, and slowly though the eddy moved, it had carried the drift nearly opposite the point where the unseen speakers were located.

There had been other words spoken while Dandy Darling was warning Lettice to silence, but he had been too deeply interested to understand them. Now it was different; and holding his breath lest it aid in dispersing those smoke curls, he listened intently, more than half expecting to hear a yell or a shot to tell of their detection.

"You kin joke all ye want," came a sulky voice, followed by a faint splash, made by a loosened clod rolling down into the water. "But the boss set me hyar to keep all eyes an' ears open. I hearn somethin' in the drink, an' 'twasn't so durned ole catty, nuther!"

"A marmad, doin' of her washin', mebbe," laughed his mate.

"More like a hoss a-kickin'," was the grim retort. "Anyway, I'm gwine take a look ef—"

"Better look out fer the quicksands, crit-

ter!" sharply called out the second speaker, as his fellow broke off abruptly, with a sound as if he had lost his footing on the loose clods.

"Shet yer fool' head, an' come 'long! Ef I tell the boss how durn shif—"

The voice died out in an indistinct growl as the fellow made his way down the river-bank, toward the spot where Darling's horse had so unfortunately jumped into the grip of the deadly sands.

No sound of struggling had come from there for several minutes, and though he felt a keen pang as he remembered how long and how faithfully the noble creature had served him, Dandy Darling fervently prayed that the quicksand had done its work, at least sufficiently to let the water flow unbroken over that spot.

Still, he dared not trust entirely to that frail chance, and as he saw that the drift had almost, if not quite, reached the utter end of the eddy, swinging slowly away from the dimly visible shore, he turned on one side, and calling both legs and one arm into play, tried all he knew how to force the log further along, out of the eddy and into the current.

The water was cool enough to chill even his strong frame, and that told him how severely Lettice must be suffering; or would suffer, when her consciousness should fairly return to her; but feeling certain that the unseen speakers were enemies, he believed that he was working all for the best.

"Can't I help you, sir?"

Softly, faintly, full of music were those notes, but they gave Dandy Darling a shock, severe enough to send his head ducking half under water, nearly strangling the poor fellow as he tried to catch his breath with a gasp.

"Don't—holy smoke! I thought it was—a ghost!" he spluttered, as soon as he could free his windpipe of water.

"I heard what they said. I knew you were right. It was not my poor brother, as I fancied at first, but—Did you really say he is safe?"

Dandy Darling gave another gulp, not caused by water this time, as he heard that piteous whisper, so full of conflicting doubt, fear, hope. But a simple lie was far easier to swallow, and he at once replied:

"Safe and sound, I assure you, Miss Acton! Just as you shall be, if you'll only try to trust me—a little."

"I thank you—oh, so much!" sighed Lettice, her head sinking back on the wet log. "I lost him—and Christine—the fire was—"

"Try to forget it all, please, Lettice," gently uttered the detective, his arm moving until his hand could softly pat her bowed head. "It'll all come out right if—I really believe we've hit the solid current after all!"

His voice rose to an unguarded pitch, but he instantly checked it, turning to look toward the shore.

He could see nothing. He could hear nothing, though they must be very nearly opposite the point where the gallant black horse had leaped to his doom.

Looking higher, he could see the ruddy glow, spreading widely over the heavens, casting a dim reflection over the very spot where they drifted now, but the fire had swept far beyond his range of vision.

The stars were shut out by heavy clouds which threatened rain, a few stray drops of which were already patterning faintly on the water about them.

Satisfied that, even if those rough speakers had discovered the dead horse, they could not recognize the human freight borne by that drifting log, Dandy Darling turned his attention elsewhere.

It was not so easy to determine whether he had actually sent the tree-trunk out past the edge of the eddy, as yet, though that doubt would surely be settled by the time the lower end was neared. Still, it was a point too important to neglect, and Darling once more resumed his efforts, swimming strongly, forcing the log inch by inch away from the shore, giving over only when all doubt was banished.

They were really free from the eddy, and each passing moment was bearing them further away from those unseen enemies!

Not until he felt fully assured on this point did Dandy Darling say as much to his companion. Lettice received the information very quietly, though there was a tremor in her voice as she murmured:

"May I speak—or change my position?"

"Both, most assuredly! I only wish I could grant you greater relief, Miss Acton!"

Lettice lifted her head and shoulders, gazing around them in silence for a little space. Then a sigh parted her lips, giving Dandy Darling more pain than a heavy blow could have inflicted, though she bravely strove to cover it with a little laugh, saying:

"I was always fond of sailing on—have we much fu' ther to go?"

"You are cold? You are suffering, Miss Acton?" asked Darling, having no answer ready for that query.

How far were they going? Who could answer that!

"It is chilly, and—don't mind me, sir," be-

traying her sufferings by the very effort she made to disguise them.

"I'll land just as soon as possible, Miss Acton, but—"

"You know me, then?" curiosity conquering all else for the moment, as she bent a little closer, peering through the gloom with her smoke-inflamed eyes. "Have I—your voice sounds familiar, yet—"

She broke off with a low, frightened cry, rising higher on the log and thrusting out one hand, half in warning, half through the curious instinct which impels one when coming unexpectedly upon a dangerous obstacle in the path.

"Look! oh, what is it?" she gasped, huskily, staring at the dark mass lying directly in their course, and from which came a low, peculiar roaring.

It was a sound that alarmed Dandy Darling as well, though he was at no loss to recognize its origin; rather because he did know just what it all meant.

The current was bearing them directly down upon a mass of driftwood, lodged against a snag or swayer. Their log, thanks to his recent struggles to force it further away from the eddy, was floating broadside on, the danger of which he at once recognized.

It all depended on how the upper edge of the drift was formed. If its depth was slight, if the current flowed freely under, instead of recoiling from, there was imminent peril of being sucked down and carried under the mass, there to be almost certainly caught and held until drowned! And knowing all this, Darling knew still more: knew that they were too close to escape the drift by swimming!

CHAPTER XI.

IN A FIERY FURNACE.

FRED ACTON neither heard the shot that sent him down, nor caught a glimpse of the one who handled the weapon; his sole sensation was not unlike what he might have experienced had his skull suddenly flew wide open under the influence of that terrible heat.

He threw up his hands and clapped them to his head, even as he fell heavily, inertly, as one falls from whom life has been suddenly taken.

The last thought in his brain was for Christine; her name the last sound that crossed his parched lips.

So sharply was he stricken down that his feet still lay in the narrow path. His head and shoulders crushed down the coarse-stemmed grass to one side, his face buried deep in the rank growth.

The rolling clouds of smoke circled and tumbled around and above the motionless body, at times covering it over as with a sable blanket, then doubling up and over, rolling away on the heated air, leaving slender serpents of smoke to creep and crawl through the grass, shooting out as though gifted with horrible life as the suction overcame the resistance thus found.

The roaring of the flames grew louder, coming nearer, increasing the already parching heat until it seemed as though all exposed to its influence must burst into flames even before those yellow and red tongues could come to hasten the destruction.

Here and there the fiery meteors darted through the smoky air, now up, now down, now straight as the flight of an arrow, then curving, dancing, swooping in eccentric figures.

And, almost certainly, if it had not been for one of those very couriers, Fred Acton would have died, possibly without ever regaining his consciousness sufficiently to realize his hideous doom.

A glowing bunch of grass, reduced to a ball, came shooting through the intensely heated air, falling on the back of Fred's neck, raising a blister the instant it settled down, drawing a gasping moan from the poor fellow's lips—a moan that, if interpreted aright, would have given the name of the one he loved so madly.

A hand slipped from his head to the dwindling ball of fire, crushing it out and breaking the skin at the same time.

It was like a keen spur to the failing horse; Fred Acton staggered to his feet and plunged heavily forward, still with that one thought uppermost: to find and save Christine from the flames, or to fall and perish with her loved form clasped in his arms.

It was pure instinct that led him away from those rolling flames. So far as reason aided him, Acton might have staggered right into the jaws of death.

He tried to shout aloud the name of his missing love: did send forth a husky, inarticulate sound, but anything more was beyond his powers. The heat had parched his throat, swollen his tongue, even as the smoke had clogged the workings of his lungs.

A little whirlwind gathered a mass of black smoke and twisted it into a column as it swept across his path. Only to a brain nearly crazed and eyes on the point of failing forever, would there have been anything resembling the human form in that unsubstantial fabric, already going to pieces; but Fred Acton reached out his quivering hands to embrace it, huskily gasping:

"Christine! I'm—save you—or die!"

A curtain of smoke suddenly shot down before him, but with crazy energy he sprung forward, pursuing the phantom thus conjured up, running faster, freer, stronger than at any time since he fell before that unseen hand.

More than once he tripped and fell, his feet tangled in the rank grass, but as often he rose again and pressed on, ever seeing his phantom Christine just ahead, now beckoning him to follow, laughing or smiling, now fleeing with averted face as though offended.

Hoarse, harsh, inarticulate sounds came from his cracked lips. To his unsettled brain they were eloquent appeals to Christine for forgiveness, for pity, or else prayers that she might pause long enough for him to shield and save her with his undying love. To others they would have seemed the wild, blood-curdling laugh of a maniac.

All this was but delaying the end. Even a maniac could not hope to win the race over such difficult ground, with such a pursuer.

The line of flames crept nearer the fugitive. The heat grew more intense. The grass through which he forced his way was curling, crisping, even beginning to blacken and char at the tips.

His hair was scorching, and the woolen shirt covering his back began to smoke and give out an ominous scent.

Yet the poor fellow hardly felt it; or, feeling, failed to realize what it really meant.

His only thought was of Christine, his only hope to overtake the one he loved, so he might bear her in his eager arms to safety.

Although he did not fully realize as much, the terrible heat was surely doing its work, and Fred Acton only staggered now where he had run but a minute before. If he should fall again—

Fall he did, but it was not the tangled grass that tripped him up, nor the hot, rustling blades of grass that received his body.

He stumbled over a clump of low, scrubby bushes, the leaves of which were already turning from fresh green to dirty brown. He fell headlong into a pool of water, sinking out of sight for a second, to come up with head and face plastered with slimy moss, through which his breath came in short, sharp gasps, like a daring swimmer who rises for the first plunge into a bath where the water is at the point of freezing.

And such this seemed to Fred Acton, contrasted with the fearful heat to which he had so long been subjected. And yet, steam was beginning to rise from the edges of the little pool, and the few leaves of deer-foot dock were curling up and turning yellow!

The shock was intense, as it was well. Less than that could hardly have wrought a cure in his case; more might have proven instantly fatal, but this was just sufficient to clear away those crazy mists, for a time, at least.

Fred Acton tore the moss from over his eyes, heedless that bits of skin came away at the same time. He looked hurriedly around him, still in quest of Christine, yet taking in his present situation almost unconsciously.

He had fallen into one of those odd, yet numerous, pools of water to be found all through the western country, and which are locally known as "buffalo-holes."

In some cases this is no actual misnomer, though "wallow" would be a little closer the mark; for the first depression was certainly made by one of the shaggy animals trying to rid itself of annoying insects or its winter's coat, by lying down and turning in a circle with its hump for a pivot and its hoofs as motor. Others would use the same spot, for a similar purpose, still others following their example until, in course of time the first dent became a deep hollow, the sides being worn away by buffalo using them to scratch or rub against.

These hollows, or wallows, would fill with snow. The spring sun would melt the snow. Other rills would trickle down the uneven sides as the snow melted or rain-storms came, in the end forming a miniature pond which wasted in summer, to swell in spring again.

As a general thing, these "buffalo-holes" are found in chains, leading from the higher ground to a creek or river, and where such is the case, it is easy enough to understand why they are always supplied with water.

Of course Acton did not waste time in reasoning this all out; he knew that he had stumbled into a pool of water which might prove to be the means of saving him from death; that, and he was given time to realize but little more.

The flames were already in sight, long tongues of fire shooting out in advance, licking up the parched grass and breaking the way for the rolling line of devastation.

A fiery serpent shot through the tops of the scrubby bushes that grew where Acton tripped, blasting the green leaves like magic, then quivering so near his face that Fred ducked his head under the water without taking time to draw in a full breath.

He could not remain submerged long, but even in those few seconds he was terrified to see how swiftly the fire had advanced. All was a horrid glow before him, partially subdued by the smoke and cloud of whirling ashes, but sending forth a

heat so intense that he seemed to be inhaling actual fire!

Stooping down and hastily swallowing a little water, Acton crept forward and lay close to the roots of the bushes. They would afford him at least partial cover, and—

He could not even attempt to reason further. Although the water which covered his person to the very lips, was so warm that, under ordinary circumstances, it would have seemed like taking a hot bath, his sudden immersion had given his system a terrible shock, the first effects of which he was beginning to feel.

Of what followed, Fred Acton knew but little. The flames reached the edge of the buffalo-hole, licking up the grass and biting off the scrubby bushes almost to the steaming mud itself, though all was done in a second, and the fire crossed the little pool of water without the ghost of a pause or check.

He must have repeatedly ducked his head below the steaming surface, else he could never have come through that fiery ordeal with life lingering in his body: but if so, it was done mechanically, without thought or reasoning on his part.

Yet live he did, though the water was more than half-exhausted in his refuge, and the remainder was nearly hot enough to cook an egg, before the conflagration had fairly passed by, followed by a swirling eddy of wind that seemed actually cool by contrast.

For a few minutes Acton lay motionless, his face half buried in the noisome, steaming mud, his legs and body submerged in the warm water: so warm that, ere long, the poor fellow began to stir, gasping, moaning, struggling, to at length blindly drag himself up the little bank to the charred level where hardly a grass-root had escaped burning.

That effort exhausted him, and his sore muscles relaxed. Fortunately for him, he had not crept quite far enough for his middle to cross the second shelf, else he would have lain as he fell, with face buried in the warm ashes, to surely smother. Instead, his hips slipped down, his trunk turned part over, his face came uppermost, his head resting on the tiny ridge, giving his lungs full play.

Time passed on, and though the smoke slowly faded away, the gloom increased. The day had passed, and twilight was falling.

Black clouds covered the sky, giving promise of rain, though there was nothing visible to threaten a repetition of the disastrous whirlwind of the afternoon. There was no thunder, no lightning, and the broken clouds moved but slowly.

A full hour passed by, yet Fred Acton gave no sound, made no stir, lying just as he had sunk exhausted after crawling out of the buffalo-hole.

Had he fought so desperately for life, only to perish on the very threshold of victory?

Truly, it seemed like it; but when the first cool drops of rain began falling, far apart and singly, each one casting up a tiny puff of black ashes as it struck the seared earth, a faint groan came from his laboring lungs.

Faster the big drops fell, coming straight down, striking with an audible "spat!" There was no wind below, though the clouds overhead were in motion, passing along more rapidly than at first, all of which proved that no matter how heavily the rain might pour at first, there would be no flood.

As the rain came down more freely, Acton gasped, struggled, partially lifted his body, staring blindly around him through the gloom for a score of seconds.

Then, something of that terrible ordeal came back to his bewildered brain, and he staggered to his feet with outstretched arms, huskily pronouncing the name of Christine. Then—he fell heavily on his face.

CHAPTER XII.

IN THE PATH OF THE FLAMES.

"THE good Lord help him—fer we shorely cain't!"

The words burst from the lips of one of the Big Buffalo Boomers who had vainly warned John Clegg against making his suicidal attempt to break through that line of fire, and the stout-hearted fellow turned away with a shiver as he saw the reckless rider fairly swallowed up by the smoke and flames.

"It's jest addin' one more pore critter as a sackerfice!"

"Look out! Stop him fer—"

Without taking time to complete his excited warning, another Boomer darted forward and flung his arms about the middle of Hiram Powell, just in time to keep him from rushing madly into the flames, his brain upset for the time being by the knowledge that his adopted children were in such horrible peril.

"Help, dug-gun ye!" panted the Boomer, as he struggled desperately with the crazed wagon boss. "He pull me—d'y'e want us both to go roast?"

Help was prompt, and though the old man gave them a tough struggle for victory, weight of numbers quickly told, and he was overpowered, ceasing his fierce efforts the instant he

touched the ground, lying like one whose life had gone out in that terrible moment.

There was no time to spend in caring for him, important though his life might be. The fire was still menacing the wagons, and leaving but one of their number to assist the women who, true to nature, came to save the suffering, the Boomers returned to their hot, perilous work.

Fortunately they were all trained fire-fighters, and with the wind in their favor, the victory was won without serious loss; but the sun was setting when the last spark along that wide curve was extinguished and they had time granted them in which to count their losses, and consult on their future course of action.

It was not so hard a matter to settle on the first; even before the question was openly asked, each one of the Boomers had counted it up with tolerable accuracy.

The most serious loss, of course, was that of four lives; for not even the most sanguine dared hope for an instant that any one of the luckless quartette could have escaped that terrible flood of flames.

After that, came the stampede; how many of the animals had blindly run into the death-trap, to fall victims to the fire?

"Wonderin' ain't a-gwine to tell the tale nur yit do the business," grimly cried one of the Boomers.

"That's what!"

"Ef any o' the critters got cl'ar, they ain't a-gwine fer to come back 'thout we fetch 'em, muther."

"You're mighty right, ag'in; an' I say fetch!"

"But—the gals?" almost timidly ventured one huge Boomer, his smoke-blackened face turning a shade paler as he cast a nervous glance along in the blackened wake of the fire.

There was a brief silence, man glancing at man, each one plainly preferring to hear another's voice first. Then the first speaker once more entered the breach, his voice clear and firm, though lower than before:

"Ef they're livin', they're safe fer a little longer. Ef they're—ef they hain't, then what's left won't hurt by waitin' a hour or two."

"It'd be turrible hot trampin' over yen' way, I reckon!" mumbled another of the company.

"What ef the ole man shud bu'st out ag'in? Will it be safe to leave him 'lone with the wimmin' an' kids?"

"Who said we hed to?" frowned Clark Frazer, the first speaker, who was second in authority among the Boomers, by regular election. "You, an' you, an' you," shoving a forefinger at as many men, as being briefer than calling names, "kin stop here. The rest o' us'll be heap plenty fer roundin' up the critters—sech as didn't hunt the fire, or jump blind into the sands!"

No voice was raised in opposition, for all were only too glad to escape the responsibility of forming a decision.

Frazer hurriedly warned the three men whom he had told off to stay at camp, against permitting Hiram Powell to break away, should he have another fit of craziness, and promising to use all the haste practicable, he set off at the head of his men, causing them to spread out as they proceeded.

To avoid the possibility of mistakes, he hastily gave them their instructions, though the plain facts were easily enough read: there was no use of looking for horses on the burnt tract, for had any unluckily fled before the flames, they were many miles away, or but charred carcasses by this time.

What animals they might hope to recover, would be found somewhere inside the unburnt triangle, formed by the distant hills, the river, and the deep gully across which the broken bridge had been thrown.

Uncle Hi had recovered from that deathlike stupor, but instead of raving as before, he seemed hardly conscious of what had taken place. True, he did speak once or twice about going to look for Letty and Fred, but he was easily persuaded to wait until the men could return with the horses.

Fresh material was collected for fires, and once more the women began preparations for supper. Now that the awful excitement had passed, all began to feel the need of some such bodily support, and the horse-hunters, successful or not, would be ravenous when they came back.

Finding Powell so much more easily managed than they had dared to hope for, the three Boomers set about putting the camp in order. They contrived to right the wagons which the whirlwind had upset, repairing what damage they were capable of, working with a will.

Though weary enough in body, they welcomed these duties, for anything was better than idleness: that would give them nothing to do but think of those poor girls and the terrible fate which must surely have overtaken them!

It was bad enough for strong men to be burnt alive, but—

Sooner than any one had dare hope for, the horse-hunters came back from their quest, having met with much better fortune than could have been looked for, with reason. Less than a dozen animals, all told, were missing, and it was highly probable that some of them would be re-

gained when a more thorough and extensive search could be made.

Darkness had cut their quest short; that, and the grim necessity which now confronted them, of following in the path of the flames to search for the remains of their missing friends.

Though all knew what must be done, no one mentioned the subject before the evening meal was finished. Even Hiram Powell was silent, though something of his old powers seemed to be returning to him as the first effects of that awful shock began to wear off.

"I reckon we'll be trampin', lads," said Frazer, rising to his feet, and speaking with a gruffness assumed to cover his real emotion when he turned toward Powell, who sprung quickly erect. "You'll stay by the camp, Uncle Hi, fer—"

"I'm going to look for my children. Who'll dare lift a hand to hinder me?" sharply cried the wagon boss, his eyes catching fire, his hands seeking the empty holsters from which his pistols had been removed without his knowledge.

"Nobody, Uncle Hiram, ef you want to skulk from duty," slowly said Frazer, fixing those wild eyes with his own cool, steady orbs. "Your place is here, guardin' the wimmen an' the kids. An' then, too, when we tote Letty an' Fred back—fer they'll be monstrous tired, ye want to mind!—when we come totin' them, who'll hev things ready fer to chirk 'em up, ef you ain't here?"

"You think—they're not burnt all up?" quavered Powell, his voice weak, his eyes dimming with tears.

Frazer led the sorely shaken old man back to the tent which had been arranged for him by the women, and loyally telling what he felt were pious lies, he managed to win his consent to remain with his cousin, Mrs. Nettie Rhodes, until their return.

"Now we'll make up for lost time, boys!" he growled, striking out from camp, and following in the path of the fire. "I couldn't come no quicker, fer I jest *had* to lie the old man into peace an' waitin'. Ef he'd struck out fer comin', I'd hev tied him up—sure!"

"Then you raally reckon that wo'll find—"

"Heap sight moro'n 'nough to drive Uncle Hi plum' crazy, an' ef you wasn't born a fool, you'd know as much 'thout axin', Tom Dick!"

This was slender encouragement on which to seek further information, but those rough tones were not resented by word or action. All knew why Clark Frazer was so unusually gruff; he dared not be gentle, lest he break down completely.

All had made a hasty calculation long before, and no one expected to find aught in any place near the camp; so there was no surprise felt or expressed when Frazer permitted them to keep together for some little time after starting out.

The rain was falling, though apparently the heaviest part of the shower had passed by. It was dark on the level, all the more so from the dense carpet of ashes left by the fire. And yet, there was little danger of their passing by any object as large as the body of a human being without notice.

The flames had made wonderfully clean work of it, licking up even the young, green grass which had attained quite a growth, despite the smothering density of the last year's crop. Here and there was a little bump or hillock, formed by prairie squirrel or ants, but they could not well be mistaken, even in that gloom.

Presently Frazer directed his men to spread out, keeping abreast and near enough to be sure that nothing of importance was passed by without examination. Then the grim quest proceeded.

At first there had been some little question whether or no the gully itself had better be searched, but that idea had been negatived.

If the missing ones had found refuge from the fire in the gulch, they would surely have clambered out and returned to camp long ago, to relieve the fears of their friends.

Then, too, the natural lay of the ground, with the course the girls were taking when last seen, worked against that frail hope.

"I'd give my best hand to know that the gals—not countin' the two boys—was in the ditch," said Frazer, his voice husky and far from steady. "But I know better. They're on the bottom—what the fire has left! God rest tha'r souls, anyway!"

And along the nearly level bottoms their search was directed, each man straining his eyes to right and to left and in advance, crouching as though stealing upon a dangerous enemy, listening to catch the cry of discovery from one of the others—and silently praying that the grim lot fall not to himself!

Had there been the light of day to guide them, it would not have been quite so bad. But now—with this unbroken gloom—knowing what a horrible sight awaited, upon the discovery they expected each moment to make—it was absolutely sickening!

Yet there was no flinching, no holding back. The duty lay before them, and must be performed to the best of their ability.

Time and again some one of the searchers would recoil for an instant as his aching eyes

caught sight of some object which might prove to be a corpse; recoil, then doggedly force himself forward to investigate more closely, his heart only resuming its natural place when a gopher or ant-hill alone turned up.

The search led them so far, that each man began to wonder if it could be possible that the flames had devoured everything! But that could hardly be. More likely some of the searchers had passed the bodies by without seeing them, or—

"Halt!" suddenly cried Clark Frazer, his voice giving each man a shivering thrill, for all believed the dreaded discovery had at last been made. "Look back! What's that all mean? What—Fire, by—!"

So absorbed had all been in the search, that not a single backward glance had been taken until this instant. But now, as they stared bewilderedly toward camp, they saw a dull red glow rapidly rising through the gloom, and knew that Frazer was right!

"Rally, boys!" Frazer thundered, emptying his pistol. "Tbar's tiouble at camp!"

CHAPTER XIII.

THE WOUNDED FIREBUG.

CLARK FRAZER was right. There was trouble at camp, and plenty of it, too; but in order to fully understand just how it all came about, it is necessary to turn back a few hours, or shortly after the passage of the whirlwind.

Taking all things into consideration, Dandy Darling did pretty fair work for a man taken so completely by surprise as he had been, and only for the swirl of wind that caused a barrier of flame and smoke to shoot out between them, it is rather more than likely he would have done still better before remembering his more important mission: the saving of life, not taking it.

As it was, one of the firebugs lay almost helpless along the neck of his horse, one hand fastened with a death-grip in the thick mane, blood pumping from his breast with each leap the mustang made.

Only for his comrade he would have been unseated at the start, and thus found a winding sheet formed partly by his own hands.

With one hand steadying the wounded knave in his saddle, gripping the reins between his teeth to leave his right hand free to work a pistol, Dan Devoe fled as hastily as he had charged boldly but a few instants before.

Now that he fairly recognized the Daisy Detective, it would be no easy task to decide which he longed for most: to kill, or to escape.

That he was not exactly a coward, his fidelity to a wounded comrade gave proof, since he might have fled with a far better chance for getting off unharmed had he looked out only for himself; but the sight of Dandy Darling, knowing who and what he was, sent a current of actual terror flowing through the tough organ serving Devoe as a heart.

He gave a gasp of relief when the fire shot between them, and another, as through that red and black curtain came the cry:

"See you later, my hearty!"

A bullet bore the words company, and though aimed simply by guess, it passed close enough to Dan Devoe's ear to make him jerk his head violently to one side, just as a boy dodges the vicious dart of a bumblebee whose nest he is trying to rob.

"Don't leave—" gasped the wounded firebug, as that friendly hand dropped from his shoulder.

"Don't skeer—I'm with ye, Billy Blue!" quickly answered Devoe, recovering his former position. "You hain't hurt so bad but what ye kin bite a bit, ef that durned critter—Stiddy, boy!"

The wounded firebug made a desperate effort, lifting himself nearly erect in his saddle, one hand groping for a weapon while he glared backward in expectation of beholding that dangerous enemy.

Dan Devoe also turned his head, though he was beginning to recover from his brief panic, probably because it was now almost certain that the Daisy Detective had been beaten back by the flames.

As they did this, a shifting of the uncertain winds drove back the smoke and flames, giving them a glimpse of a truly startling picture far beyond.

"Holy smoke!" gasped the wounded firebug. "Will ye see that? Now I know he's a devil!"

For, even as they looked, Dandy Darling wheeled his noble black and leaped directly into (as it seemed from their standpoint) the raging sea of fire!

Instinctively Dan Devoe had wrenched up both horses, and for a brief space the two roughs sat motionless, staring blankly at the point where they had lost sight of the Daisy Detective. Then, as nothing more was seen of the man or beast, and a flash of roaring fire once more intercepted their view, Dan Devoe gave a short, ugly laugh, saying:

"Man or devil, it's all one! Satan himself couldn't come out o' that fire 'thout losin' both tail an' horns—no he couldn't, now!"

"I don't—he's a devil!" buskily panted Billy Blue, swaying like a drunken man in his saddle, then collapsing all at once.

His companion once more saved him an ugly fall by his quick grip, and as the flames were eating their way perilously near to that very spot, he once more urged the willing horses on, heading for a secure spot on the higher ground.

"I reckon the job's jobbed plenty 'nough!" he muttered, turning for a look backward as the foot of the hill was gained. "Ef it hain't, then the other boys'll hav to make up the lackin', fer all o' me. Billy Blue—how goes it, anyway, pard?"

From soliloquy to query, but with slight reward for his trouble.

Billy Blue lay limply over the horn of his saddle and the withers of his horse, forming but a poor counterfeit of his usual brisk, active, seldom-still self. And though Dan Devoe was rascal and ruffian, born and bred, there was a frog in his throat and a bit of dew in his eye as he looked at his chum.

"Hit hard—too mighty hard, 'pears like!" he mumbled, steadying the limp form as he once more pressed on, leaving the danger-line behind them when the dense grass was abandoned for the more sterile slope.

He cast a look in the direction of the ruined bridge as he drew rein, at length, but though there was something plainly out of kilter, as he had interpreted the programme, he could not spare time to entangle the puzzle just then.

"Ef that's a kink, it didn't come in my part o' the line," he muttered, swinging himself from the saddle, running an arm through the loose rein to hold his horse secure while he lifted Billy Blue to the ground.

He showed his training leading by the two animals to one side, hitching them in a little hollow where they would be out of sight in case any inconvenient attention was directed to that part of the range, doing his work thoroughly, despite his anxiety on account of his wounded friend.

This accomplished, however, he was not long in learning the truth, so far as his comrade was concerned.

Changing his position to a more comfortable one, and one at the same time better calculated for investigation, Devoe drew his knife and slit up the blood-saturated shirt in the neighborhood of the hurt, parting the cloth and laying the wound bare.

Gentle though his movements were, they drew a faint groan from the bearded lips of the firebug, whose eyes opened as he flinched from those friendly fingers.

"Stiddy, pard!" cheerily spoke Devoe, forgetting his own injuries in his wish to lighten the burden his chum had to bear. "I'll handle ye like a baby, but—"

"You ketched it, too, Danny!" groaned Blue, that discovery actually seeming to do him good!

"Me? Oh—yes!" ejaculated Devoe, a hand going up to the ugly-looking wound that marred his own face. "Did ketch a bite, 'pears like, but I clean fergot it ontel you let on."

"Looks like you'd lost pritty nigh a bull jawbone!" persisted the firebug, his voice growing stronger and clearer, and actually ending in a laugh to follow the words: "I always did say you toted too mighty much cheek, pard!"

Devoe laughed likewise, though his ended in a grimace of pain. Now that the excitement was cooling down, he began to feel pain on his own account.

"Never you mind my cheek, Billy," he growled, once more bending over that body wound. "Lay still, an' bite that clapper o' yours ef ye can't keep it still any other way. I've got to—"

"Tain't so mighty bad, is it, Danny?" his voice growing husky, sinking to a whine that spoke of a white feather in his plumage. "Ye don't reckon it's—I ain't gwine to—croak!"

"Shet trap, or I'll croak ye to save the two ears o' me!" growled Devoe, calling exaggeration to his aid. "How kin I tell whether you're dead or not, ef ye won't let me look?"

Billy Blue subsided, with a hollow groan. It may have been another bit of reaction, but almost certainly a part of his weakness was due to his intense fear of death.

Without a care for himself, Dan Devoe examined the wound. The bullet had entered the right breast of the firebug, passing between a couple of ribs, but whether or no it had injured any vital organ in entering the hollow, Devoe had no means of ascertaining.

Thoroughly acquainted with the capabilities of such weapons as wise men carry on the border, he gently lifted Billy Blue sufficiently to permit the introduction of a hand under his trunk. Then, after a bit of guarded feeling with his fingers, he gave a low ejaculation of relief.

"What is it, Danny?" faintly moaned the wounded firebug.

"Heap sight better word then I dast to look fer, pard!" chuckled Devoe, lifting his chum to a sitting posture, bracing him thus with a knee while slitting his shirt up the back. "Struck mineral an'—tha she am, fer rocks!"

He held up a battered bit of lead before the eyes of his mate, set free from where it had lodged just beneath the skin, under his shoulder-blade.

"Look at her, Billy! Jest the marks o' the grooves, an' never a sign to show that she even tetch'd a bone in passin'! A clean hole both

sides fer to dreen out the bad, an' I'mbettin' you'll be fit to take a try at collar-an'-elbow afore the new month comes in!"

"Honest? You ain't stufflin' me, Danny?" quavered Blue.

"Cross my heart an' honest Injun, Billy," laughed Devoe, then abruptly hunching up one shoulder as the grin agonized his own wound. "Why, man, that devil on wheels wouldn't know his own work ef he was able fer to see ye, a week from this!"

"He ain't—he cain't come hyar, Danny?" whimpered the injured firebug, shivering with almost superstitious awe as he cast a fearful glance around. "You won't let him do—"

Devoe burst into a harsh laugh, this time giving no heed to the pain it caused his badly lacerated cheek, for he was recalling that last glimpse of Dandy Darling.

"Let him? Whar was the critter when ye see him last, Billy? Jumpiu' right into the hot test o' the fire! Ridin' straight to hell!"

"He's a devil—he'll come back—fire cain't tetch the like o' him, I tell ye!" shivered the superstitious firebug.

"Devil goes, ef that'll make ye lay any easier, Billy," soothingly broke in the stronger knave. "An' bein' a devil, he'll find it so terrible comf'able in the furnace, thar, that he'll forgit to come out ag'in afore ye cover 'nough to pluck up an' feel he's lingerin' too mighty long fer yer revinge—eh, boy?"

But Billy Blue was not so readily comforted. Doubtless pain and loss of blood had weakened his ordinary nerve, for he shivered with fear, and his haggard eyes kept wandering timorously about as he spoke.

"You don't know him like I do, Danny, or ye wouldn't talk that-a-way! I tell ye, he's a devil, all over! Fire can't begin to faze him, an' he'll come out ag'in, never a hair turned, whar common men'd roast to nothin' afore they could yelp out twiceit?"

"Waal, hev it your way, Billy, je so ye quit squirmin' long 'nough fer me to sort a plug ye up until I kin do better. Mebbe the critter is proof ag'inst fire, sence ye ttink so, but that he wasn't proof ag'inst lead, I kin take my solemn 'davy! Didn't I see him jump in the saddle when I pulled down on him?"

"You hit him, Danny?"

"Hit him hard, or I don't know!" is the savage response. "I see him jump, bu' I ketched it—biff!—right in the jaw, 'fore I fa'rly ketched my full sight ag'i, the fire jumped out atwixt us. Then—waal, you know how we see'd him next, Billy!"

"Eatin' fire—but he gits fat onto it, Danny, I tell ye! He'll come out all the sounder fer takin' sech a bath, an'— Danny?"

"Right on deck, Billy!"

"Tell the boss all about it, Danny! Tell him that the Daisy Detective ketched us bu'stin' the fire-bombs, an'— He's comin', Danny," breaking off with a husky cry of terror as the rapid thump-thump of hoofs came to their ears from no great distance. "Didn't I tell ye he was a devil?"

CHAPTER XIV. THE BIG BUFFALO GANG.

The wounded firebug cowered there, too badly frightened to even think of drawing a weapon to defend himself, but Dan Devoe was made of tougher metal.

"I'll turn him to a devil, sure enough!" he grated, jerking out a revolver and leaping forward, making a barricade of his own body, back of which his chum could come to no harm while his life lingered.

He caught a glimpse of a horseman through the slowly settling smoke, but the animal was a buckskin in color, and its rider was a good foot taller than the Daisy Detective.

His pistol had come to a level, but instead of picking trigger, Devoe lifted the muzzle, crying out sharply:

"Which way, Joe Green?"

A savage jerk threw the yellow mustang back on its haunches, and at the same instant its rider sunk low on the side opposite that from whence the challenge came; but before the ready pistol could catch an aim, Devoe called out again:

"Don't be a fool, Joe Green! We're of the same feather, an' you'll show good sense by savin' yer gaffs fer chicks out o' 'nother yard!"

"Sure it's you, Devoe?" cautiously said the rider, lifting a shaggy face high enough to steal a look over the neck of his mustang.

"Sure as I be that ef you wasn't you, but a bird o' the feather you tuck me fer, I'd 'a' drap-ped ye, dead in the pit, Greeny!" laughed the firebug, advancing, replacing the weapon in its scabbard as he did so.

"Whar's the rest o' the boys?" asked Green, rising up in the saddle now that his fears were abated.

"Billy Blue's with me—what they is left o' him. T'others—waal, I reckon they know, but durned ef I do. Whar's the boss?"

"Snashin' his tushes an' ripping his shirt up the back, last I see of him," with a short, ugly laugh as he swung one long leg over the neck of his beast and peered curiously at the cowering form of the wounded firebug back of Devoe.

"Sweatin' at—what?"

"You-all, I ruther reckon."

"What's wrong with us?"

"Too dug-gun in a hurry, nigh's I kin figger it out," nodded Green, slipping a plug of navy from his hip pocket and gnawing off a chunk. "Waal, I'm topin' he'll git his sweat off afore you come thar, Danny, but fer fear o' not—shake?"

"Ef you'd ever git into a habit o' sayin' somethin' when ye hev to chin, Greeny!" frowned Devoe. "What's gone wrong? How've we bin to fault? Cuss ye, critterl out with your mes-sage!"

"That's business, an' busines goes," nodded Green, swinging his leg back and finding his stirrups. "The boss sent me to pick up you-all, an' face ye his way. He's powerful hot under the collar 'long o' you boys settin' out the fire too soon, but—"

"Too soon?" sharply interjected Devoe. "Ye hain't got no excuse fer jumpin' onto my neck, Joe Green! Ef ye want to spur any critter, hunt up them above, who give me the sign I was to watch an wait fer. An' wait I did; the air was full o' smoke, an' the blazes was nigh swingin' the winkers o' me afore I bu'sted the first bomb!"

"That lets you out, then, ef ye kin git the boss to wait long 'nough fer ye to ixplain the way of it."

"He's waitin' fer us, then?"

"That's what I come fer."

"Whar is he?"

"Right whar you left him. What's the matter with Billy?"

"Ketched a hole. Never you mind 'bout him. Go pick up the lads, an' take yer tongue with ye—please!"

With a snarl, Devoe turned his back, and with a careless laugh Joe Green sent his yellow mustang on, quickly disappearing amidst the smoke.

"Cap'n Kay cain't blame us, Danny!" faltered Blue, as his chum came back to his side.

"Not ef he ain't too mighty hot to hear to reason, Billy," was the response, quickly supplemented by the assurance: "Anyway, he'll never call a cripple to take a buckle, so you're safe 'nough from his gaffs, pardner."

"An' you, Danny?"

"Waal, that 'pends mostly on what it is when the time comes. Ef it's only a currycombin' 'long o' his tongue, reckon I kin stan' an' take it. But ef—waal, a man kin spit in my face, but he hain't got no leave to rub it in, a'terrards, Billy!"

Dan Devoe locked his teeth behind that grim speech, and would say nothing more until after completing the bandaging of Blue's hurt. He had learned enough to feel sure that Billy could stand a ride without putting his life in actual peril, and knowing that a refuge in that portion of the country would be anything but healthy, after what had and was yet to happen, he made his preparations for obeying the call of the man whom he acknowledged as chief.

By the time all was in readiness, Billy Blue had in a great measure rallied from his superstitious fears concerning the Daisy Detective, and when once fairly in the saddle, he bore the journey even better than Devoe had dared hope for.

Although, as a rule, Captain Kay Vaux was a man to be promptly answered when he saw fit to call, under the circumstances Devoe felt fully justified in taking his time. Mainly in order to save his chum pain and future suffering, but partly, to tell the whole truth, that the chief might have time to "cool off" before they arrived in his presence.

He may have been cooler, but he was anything but calm or mild, when he strode forward to meet the pards; but fortunately for them, it may be, his notice was called to their hurts the first thing.

"Hit, eh? How come ye so, Billy Blue?"

"The Daisy Detective done it, boss—no less!" huskily answered the firebug, swaying unsteadily in his saddle.

He said no more, for at the sound of that title, a flood of curses poured from those black-bearded lips.

A moment before, Captain Kay Vaux had been a fine looking man, even if it was after rather a stern, rugged style. Now—he looked the fiend incarnate!

Billy Blue reined back his horse, cowering with terror, almost falling from the saddle. Even Dan Devoe fell back; but it was only to lend his wounded pard a supporting hand; and had he been closely watched, it might have been noticed that his right hand rested on the butt of a revolver.

And not even Captain Kay Vaux himself could draw, cover and pull trigger swifter or surer than could the tough little rascal.

That fierce storm passed as sharply as it had come, and once more his usual self, Captain Kay Vaux addressed Devoe, bidding him give the particulars, as briefly as might be.

Devoe complied, taking care to mention the fact that neither he nor Billy Blue had started their line of fire until they knew for certain that it was raging higher up toward the bridge.

"Never mind that part; come to the Daisy Detective—Satan grill him by incnes!"

"He took it off his own accord, boss, 'thout waitin' fer Satan to stir up the fire," grinned Devoe, then hastily giving an interpretation of his words.

He stuck fairly close to the true facts, but took care to make it clear that both Billy Blue and himself had done their level best, under the curious circumstances; but if he hoped to get off scot-free, he was counting without the fiery temper of his chief.

They were bitterly cursed for not killing the Daisy Detective outright, to begin with, then cursed for having got hurt.

"Billy Blue laid up, and you marked for life! Just when every hand is needed the worst! Just when every outsider will be watching for ear-marks to recognize the Big Buffalo Gang! Just when—ten thousand curses cover Baird Impleton, and crush him to a pulp!" the tide of his nearly insane rage shifting from those before him to the one still absent.

"Curse him from top to toe! Why couldn't he strike straight from the shoulder, instead of beating about the bush after this clumsy fashion? Why couldn't—"

He left that sentence incomplete, seemingly just becoming aware of the fact that he was making a show of himself before the eyes of his men, whose respect was essential to the continuance of his reign as chief.

That he was gifted with unusually strong will power, was proven by the ease and rapidity with which he smothered his hot rage, actually calling a smile to his clear-cut features as he flashed those keen black eyes over his company.

"It's infernally crooked luck, lads, taking it all round, and you can hardly blame me for jumping over the traces for a bit. If the boys had dropped the Daisy Detective for keeps, 'wouldn't have been quite so bad, for he'll turn up again, maybe where he's even less wanted!"

"Thar was fire ahead, an' I set fire out ahind him, boss," grimly observed Devoe.

"I'm not faulting you, Dan," his stern voice actually growing soft and musical. "That you did your level best, goes without saying, even if you didn't carry the all-lavit written in red on your very face! Go, my man, and have that looked after. I can't afford to lose a trump of your caliber. Nor one like Billy Blue, neither!"

It was by using neat little bonds like this that Kay Vaux held his tough knots together; and while only a few minutes before, Dan Devoe had been ready to draw and send a bullet through that brain, now he was just as ready to die fighting for his chief.

There was no lack of helping hands, for the roughs were eager to hear the story the wounded fire-bugs could tell, more in detail. And thanks to this natural curiosity, both Dan and Billy fared right well.

They were still busy paying their debts, when another mounted man came riding swiftly up to the retreat, bearing important news, if his sparkling eyes and animated countenance was to be accepted as evidence.

He was none too quick or eager to suit Captain Kay Vaux, whose swift questions were pouring in upon him even before he could wrench his mustang up.

"Done or doin', boss?" the courier cried, in high glee at having such pleasing tidings to communicate. "Big Buffalo is clean wiped out by fire—lead sure!"

"You lie!" sharply cried Captain Vaux, one hand stretching out to point with quivering forefinger at a curiously shaped work of nature: the effigy of a mammoth buffalo bull, looming up grand and magnificent, forming a landmark for leagues in every direction. "There is the only Big Buffalo! Can that be wiped out—by fire, or aught else?"

"I meant the town, Cap'n Kay, not the butte," meekly mumbled the courier, shrinking back abashed.

"Don't I know what you meant, lad?" laughed the chief, his dark visage lighting up with fierce delight, his hands gripping that of the messenger and pressing it until he turned pale with pain. "Would you have me fall on your neck and kiss you, German fashion? I had to let off steam in some way, and so—I let you have it in the wind!"

Dropping the crushed hand, Captain Vaux bared his head to the breeze, flashing his glittering eyes over his men for a brief space before speaking.

"You heard the report, gentlemen. The town, falsely called Big Buffalo, is wiped from the face of the earth—just as it should be! There is only one Big Buffalo, and yonder it stands: ours, mind you! Ours to hold and defend, against all the crack-brained Boomers in the land of Oklahoma!"

The rough-clad, rougher-looking fellows flung up their arms, and were on the point of bursting into an enthusiastic cheer, when their chief made a peremptory gesture that commanded silence.

"Quiet, all! Would ye warn those bewildered fools, over yonder, that the Big Buffalo Gang is abroad and at work? Would ye prolong their misery by putting them on their guard? No! They have had ample warning, only to refuse to profit by it. Now—let them pay the full penalty of their folly!"

CHAPTER XV.

THE FINISHING TOUCHES.

BARRED from cheering, the Big Buffalo Gang still managed to express their perfect approval of that savage sentence. Clinched fists were shaken viciously in the direction of the camp of the Boomers, and naturally harsh faces grew repulsive as their owners permitted their full measure of venomous hatred to come to the surface.

"Wasn't there room enough in all Oklahoma for them to pick and choose from, without setting up a claim to what their betters had filed a lien upon?" added Captain Vaux, swinging his sinewy right arm in true stump-speaking fashion, the veins swelling on his temples, his swarthy face growing still darker as he continued:

"Twould have been bad enough had each one of the gang been content to do as their betters have done: drive stakes for a homestead; but one bite wasn't enough for these cormorants! Oh, no! Each man must have his patch, right enough, but he must have a finger in a still richer pudding; must be part and lot of a corporation, of a town company, banded together to steal not only a rich section of land right in the center of their claims, but steal the very name to brand it with!"

"Waal, we've holped furnish 'em fire 'nough to heat thar brandin'-iron into, anyway!" grimly chuckled one of the gang.

His fellows broke into a laugh at the hit, and Captain Kay Vaux waved his hand in impatient warning.

"That's all right, but you want to button up!"

Like many another man who likes to hear his own speaking, the chief had no desire to share his honors with another. His tongue was chilled before it could fairly be called in motion, and growling forth an order to his men to lay low and wait, signal for taking the next step, Captain Kay Vaux passed on to a point from whence he could in a tolerably fair look at the demoralized camp of Boomers.

Although matters had not progressed precisely as he had planned they should, thanks to the unlooked-for coming of the whirlwind, Captain Vaux was hardly unreasonable enough to find open fault on that score.

"It goes 's our tracks far nearer than even I counted on it!" he was musing to himself while watching the camp and its occupants. "If Dan and Billy Lad only downed that infernal detective at the jump-off! If I could only feel sure they were not lying!"

The bare idea was enough to send his volcanic blood leaping to his brain, and with a hand flying to a pistol-butt, the outlaw turned his chin on shoulder to glance toward his gang, his teeth visible in a wolfish snarl.

Right there lay his greatest weakness, and Kay Vaux knew as much; let anything go crooked, and he was a creature of fits and starts until the tangle was smoothed out and all mistakes were rectified,

"They wouldn't dare lie to me, and I'm a fool for letting such a wild fancy enter my crack-brain!" he almost savagely breathed, letting go his pistol to catch and twist the lobe of his own ear. "They're all right, good boys and true! Wish I could be as certain that Baird Impleton wasn't a fraud, trying to make me play cat to his monkey!"

That fresh doubt brought his jaws together with a savage snap, and seemed sufficient to keep them locked through the remainder of his spying.

Although both distance and the increasing gloom was against him, Captain Vaux managed to reach a fairly accurate estimate of the situation as it shaped itself in the camp of the Boomers.

He saw that the camp itself had been restored to order, and by the dusky figures moving about the fires, he knew that hunger had not been among the items destroyed by the fire and excitement.

He managed to make out the return of the party led by Clark Frazer, with such animals as they had had time to pick up after the stampede. He could see them being staked out along the edge of the burnt stretch, thanks to the ruddy glow of the camp-fires. And as he watched, an evil chuckle came through his thin lips.

"So kind, dear lads! 'Tisn't every one who'd take so much trouble to arrange matters so convenient for callers; and I'm coming, ye fools! Coming to put on the finishing touches to a mighty neat bit o' work?"

He chuckled and grinned, exhibiting an almost impish degree of evil delight, none the less thorough because he was alone, without any other to share the grim jest with him.

If there were any serious drawbacks, he had apparently lost sight of them, for the present. He had room only for triumphing over his hated enemies, and for impatience for the minute to come in which he might deal the finishing stroke.

That was not delayed much longer. He saw that the Boomers were preparing for a search along the track of the fire, and as this was all he was waiting for, he uttered a signal that brought a couple of the gang to his side.

Hastily giving them their instructions, he sent them on their way, then turned back to his main force, enumerating them at a glance, despite the darkness.

A number of his best men had not yet reported, but he felt little uneasiness on that account; they were at work according to orders, and the dozen he could count on here, were plenty for his purpose.

"Time's up, lads!" was his grim greeting in response to the general look of inquiry. "Slap on your rig-out, and don't be afraid of making your handsome selves look too devilish! There's women over yonder, but we're not starting out on a mashing expedition, and you want to keep that fact in view from the word jump!"

"We'll foller lead or trump, jest as you wink, boss," ventured Dan Devoe, his tones hardly recognizable now that his swollen jaw had been cared for by his mates, little more than his fierce eyes and sharp nose showing through the bandages.

"On deck, of course, Danny! Good enough! You'll hardly require any further disguising, but the rest of you—rig out, all!"

That was done, with a celerity that proved plenty of practice on their part. Each man covered his face with a black cloth, furnished with hole for the eyes and nose, the lower end falling to the bosom.

In addition to this, hands were gloved or liberally daubed with dampened dirt; hats were decked with plumes of grass and floating rags, clothes were turned, or similarly disguised; in a word, everything was done to change their usual appearance, and render future recognition an impossibility.

Captain Kay Vaux set them the example, and it was a grimly fantastic figure that delivered the final address before they set forth on their mission of ruin and brutality.

"You know what's coming, lads, so I'll not cut time to waste by repeating particulars. Enough, that we're to sweep the camp of the Boomers clean! That's the main point, but there's another, hardly less important.

"Sweep clean! But—no shooting to kill!"

"Not ef the critters show fight, boss!" ventured Devoe.

"To save your own lives, of course; but that'll hardly happen. Make all the racket you like: shoot the dogs if they haven't been run out by wind or fire; whoop and yelp and play the devil on wheels to your hearts' content: but—I say again, and say it loud: no butchering if it can be avoided!"

It was only repeating with emphasis the instructions he had already delivered, so Captain Vaux did not think it necessary to give his reasons in extenso. Enough that his meaning was fully understood by the Big Buffalo Gang.

And thus it came to pass that fresh trouble burst upon the demoralized camp of the Boomers.

Literally so, in fact, for, leading the way himself, Captain Vaux broke cover with a whoop and a yell, shrill and wild enough to have put a drink-crazed Indian to the blush.

Backing their chief up with hearty good will, each rascal emulating that unearthly yell as best he could, flourishing their pistols and only too eager to use them upon the barking, howling dogs whose repose had been so uncomfortably disturbed.

The thunder of hoofs, those hideous screeches, the flashes of burning powder and vicious cracks of exploding revolvers, all combined to form an uproar quite sufficient to frighten women into screams and children into shrieks.

The rain had driven them under cover, but now they poured forth from the dingy little tents, frantic with fear, rushing aimlessly here and there, crying, shrieking, sobbing, feeling that if the end of the world had not indeed come, it might almost as well!

"Cut and slash! Shoot and slaughter!" howled Captain Vaux, his voice hardly recognizable even to his own ears, lifting his snorting steed and causing it to leap upon and through a tent out of which a terrified mother and children had just fled. "Butcher all who dare lift hand or touch a weapon, but—spare the submissive!"

He put particular emphasis on the final words, but he might as well have spared his breath. If any heard, no one comprehended, among the Boomers, at least.

Only in one instance was there anything like an effort to oppose them, and that by a sorely stricken old man—the only man left in camp!

Roused from a partial stupor by those hideous yells, Hiram Powell sprung from his rude pallet, catching up the pistols which he had persuaded the women to restore after the Boomers left camp on their sad quest. He dashed out of the little tent, and opened fire on the evil gang, doing his level best to avenge the ruin they were beginning.

But Captain Vaux, unluckily for Uncle Hi, was close at hand, and sweeping down upon the dauntless veteran, he laid him low with one swinging stroke of a clubbed revolver!

It was a short, swift victory on the part of the raiders. A few of the dogs were killed, the rest routed. The women and children were scattered in every direction. Uncle Hi was down, dead or stunned.

All that remained was to reap the fruits of their "glorious victory!"

Sharp and clear the signal came from their chieftain, and promptly enough the knaves descended from fanfaronade to solid work.

Their horses were turned over to a guard, detailed for that purpose before the descent was begun. The rest, saving only Captain Vaux himself, rushed to the wagons and began rolling them toward the slope which ended in an abrupt descent into the gulch.

One after another the wagons were sent crashing down upon, above, or below the ruined bridge, not one being spared, the wreck being made as complete as time would permit.

The tents were torn down and cast upon the fires. Even the cooking utensils were flung into the gulch, if they could not be more effectually ruined by stroke or slash.

Captain Vaux had threatened to make a clean sweep at the camp of the Big Buffalo Boomers, and his men were doing their level best to make his boast come true!

Urging his knaves to swift and thorough work, knowing that they had little time to waste if they wished to escape the vengeance of the doubly-wronged Boomers from below, Captain Vaux only waited until he could see the end of his dastardly wrecking, then lifted his voice in loud warning to the scattered women:

"Tell the Big Buffalo Boomers that this is a final notice to quit! Wind, fire and water unites in delivering it, and if not accepted and acted upon, death will surely come to foreclose the devil's mortgage on every man, woman and child of ye all!"

As he spoke, the last wagon went plunging into the gulch, and the perspiring roughs gave a wild howl of delight, then cast fire-bombs down upon the confused wreck, their bursting being followed by bright flames, darting here and there, fastening upon the wagons and threatening to speedily complete the dastardly work begun by impish hands!

Then Captain Vaux gave the signal for retreat, and gathering up the horses saved from the stampede by the Boomers, the Big Buffalo Gang rode away through the night, laughing in devilish glee.

Even yet they were not content, for hero and there bombs were shattered in the grass, to more thoroughly blot out their trail!

CHAPTER XVI.

FIGHTING FOR THE FRAGMENTS.

AFTER all they had been called to upon do and suffer since the middle of that afternoon, this final blow seemed more than sufficient to entirely prostrate those poor women and children, driven from their frail shelter into the dark and stormy night.

But for the most part they were born and bred on the border line between civilization and savagery, and the present day can show as many heroines of the humble type as the storied days of long ago, so often lamented by people born a century after their proper period.

And the impish hoots and screeches and yelping of the Big Buffalo Gang had not yet entirely died away, before the first of those haggard, hollow-eyed, pale-faced women came creeping in out of the dark, already thinking how best they might save at least a few poor remnants from the general wreck.

"They found Uncle Hi Powell lying as he had fallen beneath that craven blow, his long gray locks matted with blood that flowed from a cruel gash in his scalp.

It was no thanks to the chief of the Big Buffalo Gang that the veteran was not dead; he had struck with all the force of his muscular arm; but the motion of his horse, added to the uncertain light, proved Powell's salvation.

The pistol-butt struck glancingly, lacerating the scalp and producing instantaneous insensibility, but saving the skull from being shattered or even fractured.

The cool drops of rain, still falling, though the shower had well-nigh ended, helped bring about a recovery, and he was moving sluggishly even as Mrs. Rhodes gained his side, sobbing her grief at what she felt was the death of her last friend and relative.

The flames were beginning to secure a firm grip on the wagon-wreck, down in the gulch, and after a few moments spent in vain bustle and confusion, one of the clearer-witted women gave the word, and needing only a show of leadership, the poorly-clad heroines jumped or slid down the crumbling bank, working with a will to extinguish the flames ere all should be destroyed.

This was the trouble which Clark Frazer sensed at the camp they had left so poorly guarded while they answered the call of common humanity. And this was the scene which met the eyes of the panting, excited Boomers when they came rushing in—not camp, but its ruins!

Uncle Hi, laboring with a will among the women, an ugly streak of blood showing freshly down his face and beard by that red glow, gave a choking cry as he heard the coming of his friends and recognized them as they reached the edge of the gulch.

He tried to utter the names of his missing

children, but the words refused to come. No need—if they had been rescued, not even that scene of dire destruction would have checked the glad announcement.

"Who's bin doin' sech devil's work, Uncle Hi?" hoarsely cried Clark Frazer, hesitating for an instant on the bank, drawn revolver half lifted, hungry as its master for a target to speak to.

"No time to talk! They're gone—down and help save the pieces!" harshly cried the veteran, returning to his work, all the more desperately because he had abandoned all hope in life.

Putting up his weapon, Clark Frazer sprung down the bank, followed in turn by his fellow Boomers as they came straggling up. Worn and weary, panting like jaded dogs after their race, in which no one had paused or spared an ounce of strength, knowing as they did how utterly defenseless they had left their wives and children, the Boomers still had grit to fall to work without pausing for even one full, free breath.

It is men of this metal, men of this caliber, that America breeds!

Their means of fighting such a fire, rendered doubly obstinate by the nature of the inflammable stuff with which the bombs had been filled, were limited indeed, but the will was there, and that meant much.

The broken bridge and lumber-laden wagon had pretty effectually dammed up the little stream, thanks to the miry bottom of the gully.

This had caused quite a collection of water above the wreck, and though the after-wreck covered this pretty well up, an occasional bucketful was obtained, supplemented by mud and dirt, all of which came into good play, even if more and closer work was entailed.

Side by side, men, women and children labored, never despairing, never relaxing their efforts, sticking to duty while duty remained. For, little by little, the flames were smothered or blotted out. Foot by foot the hot fight was won, and then, with sudden exhaustion overcoming even the hardest laborers of all, the Boomers saw the last glowing spot vanish with a sullen hiss.

Not until then were any questions asked or answered. And even then, instead of speaking the words that choked him, Uncle Hi gripped Clark Frazer with a trembling hand, by way of learning the full truth.

"Ef I ain't brung no good news, Uncle Hi, nuther did we find any bad," said the big Boomer, with assumed cheerfulness. "An' as no news is dead shore to turn out good news, cheer up, Uncle Hi! It's boun' to come out all right in the end!"

"The end—it's come already!" huskily groaned the old man, all his fire and energy gone in a moment. "Help me up the bank, friend. I'm tired—all tired out!"

"Never a wonder I'm wonderin' nuther!" blurted out Frazer, his arms supporting that failing form. "Lend a han', boys! Uncle Hi's done over-het hisself, an'—stiddy, dug-gun ye!"

The stricken Boomer was lugged up the bank, and gently lowered to the ground. Shelter there was none, thanks to the devilish persistence shown by the Big Buffalo Gang in their work of destruction.

The fire left behind them by the marauders was still burning, not so furiously as that set in motion by the whirlwind had done, for the heavy shower had dampened the dry grass, and the wind was against its front, instead of driving it onward.

Still, the rank growth lent sufficient light for the Boomers to see what they were about, and quite sufficient for them to sum up the material loss they had suffered.

Easy enough to do that!

All was summed up in the directions which Captain Kay Vaux had repeatedly given his gang: *a clean sweep!*

Then, questions were asked and answered on both sides. The Boomers briefly summed up the results gained by their search: nothing! The women told of that reckless dash upon the camp, and one or two of the cooler-headed repeated with tolerable accuracy the parting warning delivered by the wild-looking villain who appeared to be head and front of that evil gang.

"Don't need to ax who they was," grimly observed Frazer, after all was told. "Sooners, hell's blackest curses follow 'em wherever they go!"

Silence followed that bitter speech. Few though the words were, they fairly well covered the sentiments felt by each and every one of the Boomers. Nor did they need ask what "Sooners" were meant.

There is hardly any necessity for explaining this year-old word, since there can be hardly an eye of all that may chance to glance along these lines, in this era of universal newspaper-reading, whose owner has not time and again met the term in print.

They know that a "sooner" is one of that class of "boomers" who, not content to wait and take an equal chance with the thousands of home and land-hungry pioneers who obeyed the mandates of the law and hung on the borders of Oklahoma until the hour of noon, April 22,

1889, watched their chance to steal into the territory to secure the first choice of land.

Such had been the case in this instance; although the Big Buffalo Boomers crossed the line with the first second of liberty, they found themselves foisted, and the very sections which they had decided to win, all staked out and "held down" by armed "sooners!"

From that hour trouble had begun, though, up to this day, any actual collision had been avoided, possibly because the Big Buffalo Boomers, as the little colony called themselves, stuck together and made each member's cause a general one.

This much in passing: there were a number of other facts, important in themselves, as well as bearing close relation to the story here in narration, which will have to be taken up in the proper place.

Swiftly as the alarmed Boomers had raced over the burned bottoms to their endangered camp, and rapidly as they had labored ever since, all had taken time. Fully an hour had been spent on the fire in the gully alone.

Thus it came that the Boomers were still in silence after the short, fierce denunciation hurled at the Sooners by Clark Frazer, each man and possibly some of the women silently echoing his curse, when all were electrified by a hoarse yet clear shout coming out of the gloom:

"Hellow, the camp!"

One instant of utter amazement, then glad shouts and cries of joy answered back that hail, for all recognized the voice of John Clegg!

Uncle Hi Powell caught the sound and also recognized the voice of one of those whom he, in common with all the others, had given over as dead. And, forgetting his hurts, his recent weakness, the wagon boss was foremost in that glad rush to greet the saved.

He caught sight of a feminine figure, and fairly caught it in his eager arms before he recognized—not his loved Lettice, but Christine Brockelmyer!

He staggered back, heart-sick with repeated disappointments, and it was another voice than his that put the momentous question: where were Lettice and Fred Acton?

"I know me not!" slowly responded Christine. "I lose me both in the fire and smoke and—Yohn safe my life, but—I can say me no more dot awful dimes apoud! I—I vhas grow sick by—by my heart inside!"

The young woman reeled, like one overcome by what she had suffered, in mind as in body, and was quickly the center of a little knot of sympathizing women.

John Clegg, with a furtive glance toward the bowed, shaken form of the wagon-boss, spoke less freely than he might have done under other circumstances; for, intentionally or not, Christine had left an evil impression on his mind concerning the part played by young Acton in that time of awful trial.

He said little concerning his own deeds: he was ever readier to act than to talk, this diamond in the rough; but he gave a fairly full explanation of how he had found Christine, and how he undoubtedly owed his life to her.

No, he had seen nothing of the others. No, he had come across no trace of them. It was barely possible that they might have escaped, much as Christine would have escaped unaided, through blindly stumbling upon some similar refuge.

With so many startling events to glance back over, and with the future looking so gloomy ahead, even this marvelous coming to life by two of those whom they had given over as surely dead, was quickly overcome by the majority of the Boomers.

There was some little talk of sending out another search-party for the missing brother and sister, but this suggestion was finally voted down.

"Ef they're still livin', they ain't in any danger, an' ef the fire ketched 'em—as I'm greatly fearin'—what it left kin wait ontel day," gloomily decided Clark Frazer, to whom the Boomers naturally looked for guidance, now that Powell was so weakened. "We left the camp 'bout a guard once, an' you see what come of it. Say we leave it ag'in, what's to hinder them devils from comin' back an' makin' a clean sweep of it?"

"Mighty little left to sweep!" growled one of the Boomers.

"They could butcher the wimmen an' kids, an' pile 'em up in a heap fer 'nother bonfire, couldn't they? That's 'bout tha'r caliber, too!"

So, after due consultation, it was deemed best to wait until dawn before making any decided move, and the rest of the night was spent in saving what they could from the general wreck, daylight finding them thus employed, and its first dim rays brought a fresh surprise.

A wild cry startled them, and glancing that way, they saw Christine Brockelmyer just striking Fred Acton in the face!

CHAPTER XVII.

HOW THE CASTAWAYS FARED.

If the drift had been discovered a few moments earlier, a cool head and strong arm like the Daisy Detective might have averted the

eril without much trouble. As it was, he knew that any attempt to carry the log by swimming far enough to miss the mass, would not only be vain, but would leave him impotent to aid Lettice Acton when the decisive instant came.

Nine men out of every ten would have been able to do nothing more than accept what fate offered, the time for thinking or doing was so terribly brief; but Dandy Darling proved himself the exception, and the same glance that showed him the full measure of their peril, also gave him the one fair hope.

"Shut your eyes and trust wholly to me, Letty!" he cried, then dove under the tree-trunk, coming up on the side furthest from the mass of driftwood down on which the current was sweeping them.

If more time had been granted them, his course would have been different; he would have pushed on in advance, to gain a foothold on the drift in time to catch the maiden as her float should strike. Lacking that grace, he took the only course left open, desperate though it was.

Dandy Darling had barely time enough to gain his position and slip one hand between the log and the body of the maiden, then the tree-trunk brought up against the drift with a sharp shock.

The water rose above the log, foaming and gurgling as though in anger, threatening to force the burdened timber entirely beneath the surface, but Dandy Darling did not wait for that to come to pass.

Using one arm as a lever, the other as a propeller, he called all his muscular powers into play, actually casting Lettice from the sinking log to the comparatively solid drift itself.

The effort buried his own head under the water, but he had discounted that, and his feet were already at work, just as his hands came to aid them the next instant.

Relieved of its burden so abruptly, the tree-trunk ceased sinking, rising to the surface, giving Dandy Darling a chance for his own life.

His hands caught the log, and with a cool, swift deftness, he bent his body and drew up his legs until his feet slipped in between his rigid arms. He gained a foothold as the log again sunk below the surface, and that was all he asked.

A quick spring that sent the tree-trunk rolling under the mass of driftwood—and the Daisy Detective had won one more victory.

He struck the drift in a sprawling shape, but that was of his own accord, to lessen the liability of plunging through a probable crack or opening. And with cat-like swiftness he recovered, turning to make sure the shock of his falling had not endangered Lettice Acton.

"Good as old wheat!" he cried, cheerily, as he caught sight of her lifting head through the gloom. "Out of the damp, and monarchs of all we survey! Who says— You're not hurt, Miss Acton?"

It was an abrupt change, caused by the faint cry which escaped the lips of the maiden with whom fate was playing so many strange tricks of late; but a very few moments, devoted to questions and answers, set Darling's fears at rest. Beyond the shock of striking the drift, Letty had suffered no harm from his gymnastic exploit.

Satisfied on this point, Dandy Darling first made sure that Lettice was resting on a firm section of the drift, little liable to disruption by the shock of any probable collision, then he crawled off on a tour of inspection.

"No telling how long it'll have to harbor us," he muttered, below his breath, "so we might just as well begin mapping out our kingdom!"

That inspection was a work of time, though the loss could hardly be attributed to the size of the drift itself. That was nearly square in shape, which fact was accounted for by there being two snags instead of one, the lower end of the drift proper being formed by a long tree-trunk of considerable thickness, which had firmly lodged against the brace of snags. This having happened, the formation of the drift itself was easily accounted for.

Groping in the dark as he was obliged, took time and care, but Dandy Darling had another than himself to think for, and he made his examination thorough.

"Not a very big island, Miss Acton," he said, briskly, on his return to the side of the maiden. "Still, it pans out rather better than one might expect, and I reckon a couple of castaways can manage to support life upon it for an hour or two, if nothing better turns up."

Lettice murmured some brief reply, but the words were lost to even his keen ears, thanks to the hollow roaring of the water breaking against the drift, the patterning of rain-drops, and the chattering of her own teeth with cold.

Dandy Darling had little difficulty in understanding that last faint sound, for though the breeze had almost died away, what little there was sent a chill through his own sturdy frame, so recently overheated. How much more, then, must this poor girl suffer!

"Let me lend a hand, Miss Acton," he added, his cheery tones betraying nothing of his reflections. "There's a more comfortable resting

place just over here, and—don't be afraid to bear down, I beg!"

Lettice rose to her feet, clinging to his hand, but her smoke-inflamed eyes were of little service in that gloom, and just as a brother might, Dandy Darling passed an arm about her waist, carrying rather than leading her over the rough, uneven drift to a spot near its center.

Here a short but broad section of what had one time been a giant of the forest, had lodged, its barkless body showing dimly white in contrast with its surroundings. At one end rose a few huge roots, broken off short, yet amply high enough to afford both a support and wind-break when utilized as Dandy Darling intended.

Guiding Lettice to this rude throne, he seated her in a fairly comfortable position, the broken roots seeming especially provided for her purpose of resting a weary back.

"So far, so good!" the young man laughed, softly, as he drew back a bit to view the result.

"The springs are wanting, but I'll warrant you have found a wagon-seat less comfortable more than once since you set face toward Oklahoma!"

"It is comfortable; I thank you, sir," shivered Lettice. "Only for you I might be— Oh, brother, dear brother!"

Dandy Darling came back, kneeling before her, taking her hands in his, and trying to drive away that clammy chill by chafing, at the same time doing his level best to quiet her troubled brain.

What if he did utter words which he felt could only be lies, while declaring that Fred Acton was safe and sound, his worst trouble being fears for her safety, just as she was worrying over him?

"And you'd be with him, too, if any fellow with a less glaring talent for making a clumsy botch of all he undertakes, had chanced across your path," he added, with doleful disgust at the result of his own endeavors. "I'm only hoping Fred won't insist on punching my head for adding to in place of lessening your troubles, Miss Acton!"

"Then—you speak as though you knew—"

"Shall I take a more careful bath, Miss Acton?" he laughed, as Lettice bent forward to see his face more clearly.

"Is it? it is!—Mr. Darling!"

"Who would feel terribly slighted by not having been recognized before, if he hadn't appeared in such questionable guise!" laughed the detective, still doing his level best to make his charge forget, in part at least, her bodily and mental sufferings. "What sort of fabled monster did you think me, Miss Acton, when I came howling down upon you out of the smoke, smoky?"

"I thought—you saved me from a horrible death, dear sir," her voice breaking, her hands trembling anew as they strove to clasp his in gratitude. "I had given up all hope. I believed I was dying, when fresh life and hope came with the sound of your voice calling—"

"Like the screechings of a runaway calliope," laughingly inserted Darling, not because her thanks were disagreeable to him—under more favorable circumstances he could have listened to them for an hour without a break—but because he feared to let her emotions gain full swing, lest her rallying strength fail her. "I can recall something of it, though, to confess the shameful truth, I was so horribly frightened that I was hardly accountable for my actions, or the sweet music I made. Did I—don't spare me, I beg!—did I actually implore you to guide me out of the wilderness, Miss Acton?"

"Is it a subject to make sport of, sir?"

"Not at the time, I grant you, but now—a man must play even, you know, or forever remain in debt!"

"As I must in yours! How can I ever hope to repay your gallant rescue, Mr. Darling? How can I—"

"By trying to forgive me for rushing you into such a precious pickle as this, my dear lady," quickly interposed Darling. "Running you out of the fire was right enough: you see, I am ready to claim all possible merit! But running you into the river was—well! call it a mistake, and let me down as easy as you can, please!"

Lettice persisted no longer in forcing her gratitude upon him, leaning back once more, shivering with cold, worn out by all she had suffered, too utterly worn out in mind and body to cope with that gib tongue.

Dandy Darling noticed her trembling, and though the broken roots against which she half-reclined, in a measure shielded her from the cool breeze coming down the river, he knew that she must be suffering severely.

Drawing back a little, he gazed keenly in the direction of the shore from which they had been driven by natural and human enemies. He could see nothing; even the shore was visible merely as a streak of darkness a little more complete than the rest of the gloom. He could hear no sounds save the dull roaring of the current as it broke against the drift.

The rain had almost ceased, but the clouds still obscured the sky, shutting out the stars and intercepting the light of the moon, which he knew had by that time arisen.

He tried to calculate how far they had floated since leaving the eddy, where the firebugs were prowling, on the lookout for possible prey; but

his success was not brilliant. With nothing as a guide, there is no movement harder to estimate correctly than such a drift.

For a few minutes longer his brain kept in active working, counting the chances for and against what he had nearly decided upon doing; a decision that became complete when, a moment later, he heard poor Lettice shivering with cold.

Casting all personal fears to the winds, Dandy Darling groped about in the dark, collecting small sticks from the top of the drift, piling them together on a natural groove which he felt in the bare trunk of the cottonwood log, then using his knife to shave up a dry splinter.

Though all this took some little time, and could not be accomplished without a certain degree of noise, Lettice Acton paid no attention to his movements, lying back with closed eyes, too utterly worn out and miserable to care for aught.

Dandy Darling drew that friend to a smoker—a water-proof safe—from his pocket, striking a match and covering the tiny blaze with his curved palms until the dry shavings fairly ignited, sending up a bright glow that drew a startled exclamation from the lips of the maiden.

"What are you doing, Mr. Darling?"

"Trying a little experiment, Miss Acton," with a short, dry laugh, the words escaping his lips before he had time to weigh them properly. "Finding out who has got the sharpest eyes among—"

"Our enemies?" supplied Lettice, as he broke off abruptly.

"No, our friends, of course," he smoothly amended, trying to cover that awkward slip. "No doubt they are out searching for their lost treasure by this time, and—"

"If alive! Who can say that they were not all overwhelmed by that fearful sea of fire? Who can—"

"That can I," quickly interjected the young man, dropping a few more sticks on the fire, then turning his attention toward quelling her fresh fears. "Let me tell you just what I saw before riding down from the hills in hopes of serving you."

CHAPTER XVIII.

WHO IS THE JONAH?

DANDY DARLING spoke rapidly once his mind was fully made up to conceal nothing of importance, but before he came to the more important portion of his story—his discovery of the firebugs at actual work—he changed his position for one nearer the maiden's side, gaining possession of her hands under pretense of warming them and renewing the circulation of blood by gentle chafing.

Thanks to the dry fuel which was to be found in abundance on the drift, lit up above the touch of the water and parched by the warm sun too thoroughly for the recent rain to have greatly impaired its burning qualities, the little fire was blazing up brightly, and already imparting a most grateful warmth, to their wet, chilled bodies.

The cottonwood roots formed a break, dividing the current of air, causing it to sweep around in an eddy, thus driving more of the heat toward them; and though a measure of smoke bore it company, that was insignificant after all they had passed through of late.

When Dandy Darling reached the point in his recital where the firebugs took a part, Lettice gave a low cry of wondering alarm, but a few judicious words quickly abated this.

"I would have kept it secret still, my dear friend, if I had not felt assured of your bravery. How could I doubt that, after your bearing up so nobly against the peril just passed?"

"It is hard—so hard to believe!" murmured Lettice, unconsciously holding his fingers with a tighter pressure, "Spreading the fire that was already threatening—it does not seem possible!"

"Tough, but true," with a soft, cheery laugh, as he cast a couple of sticks on the fire.

"Is it safe to keep a light burning? Those men—the voices we heard on shore!" hesitated Lettice, shivering anew.

"It's mighty comfortable, all the same! And—don't you reckon we deserve a bit of comfort, after all our trials and tribulations, Miss Acton? As for those fellows—well, they'll be hiding, rather than prying, now the Big Buffalo Boomers are out on the search."

"Do you really believe our friends are coming?"

"Haven't the ghost of a doubt," was the prompt response. "And while we're awaiting their coming, suppose we try to peer a bit deeper into this plot? For plot there is, or I'm way off my base!"

"You think—"

"I think this much: that there's a Jonah in your company! What I am trying to think is—what is that Jonah's name?"

"I'm not quite sure I understand, sir," hesitated Lettice.

The glow of the fire betrayed the quick flush that came into his face, and Dandy Darling apologized:

"I really beg your pardon, Miss Acton, but

I've lived for so long among rough speaking fellows, that I thoughtlessly spoke according to their caliber. What I meant was about like this

"I believe there is a secret enemy to your friends, the Boomers, who has their confidence if, indeed, he is not actually one of their number. I believe that this enemy is secretly working against them, sparing no pains to foil their dearest hopes, while none the less urging his own particular scheme toward completion. And if you look back over the events of the past few months, you will begin to catch my meaning even more thoroughly."

"How many times has misfortune struck the company? How often have they suffered losses, in some unaccountable manner?"

"Many times!" exclaimed Lettice, roused at last, just as Dandy Darling intended she should be. "Oh, how blind we all have been! How simple we have been not to have suspected something of this!"

"Merely one of the handicaps honesty has ever labored under," the detective said, with a short, soft laugh. "If the Big Buffalo Boomers had been less square-dealing themselves, the Jonah could hardly have played his tricks so successfully, and for so long a time. Now—can you help us guess who that Jonah may be, Miss Acton?"

There was no immediate response. Lettice covered her aching eyes with a hand, seemingly lost in thought. Dandy Darling did not interrupt her thoughts, for he rightly guessed that she was recalling each member of the party in turn, trying to fix on the one most likely to prove the hidden foeman.

But all was in vain. Try as she would, nothing came of it.

"I cannot think—there is not one whom I can even suspect of playing such a treacherous part!" she at length declared.

"I hardly dared hope you would find a different answer, so I reckon I'll survive the disappointment," smiled Dandy Darling, his brows gathering sternly instant later. "Still, Jonah is there, and I'll tear his blessed mask off if I have to—*ahem!*"

The fire growing low helped to cover his incomplete sentence, which might have been just a bit too forcible for the ears of a lady. This duty attended to, Dandy Darling returned to the subject in which he felt a personal as well as a professional interest.

"As you may remember, Miss Acton, I had the pleasure of passing a couple of nights in your camp, just before Oklahoma was lawfully opened; and while there I formed the acquaintance of your uncle, Mr. Powell."

"I remember, yes. But Mr. Powell is not really my uncle, though he is kind enough to permit Fred and me to so term him."

"Is that so? Then—will it be too impertinent in a comparative stranger, if I ask you a few personal questions, Miss Acton? Not from idle curiosity, I assure you, but—"

"I have nothing to conceal, least of all from you—my preserver from a hideous death," was the impulsive response, as Lettice caught his nearest hand between both of hers, pressing it warmly, gazing with tear-dimmed eyes into his really handsome face.

That was a moment of peculiar peril for Dandy Darling, but he had nerve enough to resist temptation. Instead of clasping her form, even as she was clasping his hand, he contented himself with returning that gaze, something of the truth in his still brilliant eyes, had his face not been cast into the shade by the fire at his back.

"That I was fortunate enough to be of some service to you, Miss Acton, I'll not attempt to dispute, but your life is owing to my noble herse—may his soul find rest in a heaven suitable to his kind! I would have been worse than powerless to save you without him, and— But please let that subject drop, for the present at least."

"Am I never to thank you, sir?" her voice tremulous with emotion.

"Some day, if you still feel inclined that way when the time comes 'round," lightly laughed the detective, casting sentiment aside, though the effort cost him something. "And now—I may question you, then?"

"Ask me what you will: I am not afraid to trust you."

"Thanks, once more! Then—your name is Lettice Acton: you have a brother whose name is Frederick: your father was called Albert, was he not?"

"No, sir. My father's given name was Maurice."

"Maurice—not Albert!" echoed Dandy Darling, in the tone of one who had encountered a disappointment of some sort at the very outset. "Then I'm afraid I'll have to rest my claims to acquaintanceship on the formal introduction Uncle Hi was kind enough to give me, that day."

"I don't—I hardly catch your meaning, sir," faltered Lettice.

"My stupid blundering again! You see," drawing a little nearer and assuming a more confidential tone: "I had a distant relative—or, to speak by the card, a number of them—named Acton. One of them was called Albert, and though I was never fortunate enough to meet

the gentleman in the flesh, I hoped to find his daughter in Miss Lettice. Have I made my meaning sufficiently clear, my friend?"

"Your meaning, yes, but not a tie of kindred, I'm afraid," smiled the maiden, seeming to catch some of his cheery temper. "I have no living relatives save brother Fred. Uncle Hiram adopted us when mother died after father left us."

"Another hope gone up the—blasted ere its birth!" sighed the Daisy Detective, lugubriously, but as quickly brightening up again, to add: "Still, people who have kept company through fire and water as you and I have, can't well remain strangers—can they?"

"I shall deem it an honor to call you friend, dear sir!" impulsively exclaimed Lettice, her hand going out to meet his warm clasp once more.

"I'll hold you to that pledge while life endures, Miss Lettice," Darling declared, far more deeply in earnest than his smiling face gave warrant. "And as a friend—I'm going to pelt you with a few more questions. One of them is: do you recall a man named Baird Impleton?"

Lettice shook her head negatively.

"I don't believe I ever heard that name before. It is an odd one, and I could hardly have forgotten. No, I never did!"

"Then there is no man bearing that name among the members of your little colony?" persisted Darling.

"None. I am positive on that point, for I am more or less intimately acquainted with every man belonging to the colony."

"Off the scent again!" frowned the detective, biting his lip, this time in solid earnest.

"Who is this Baird Impleton? If it is no secret, of course?"

"A precious scoundrel, just the sort of villain who could and would be at the bottom of the ugly tricks played upon your friends, if he was in a position to let his peculiar talents have fair play. I hoped to find him and the Jonah one and indivisible, to have the exquisite pleasure of casting them out, both at the same time. But if you are quite positive—as of course you are?"

"Quite positive," was the firm response.

"Then I'll have to search further for the Jonah. All the same, I'll solve the mystery and cast him forth—if not on dry land, on something that will serve his purpose equally as well!"

"It is an ugly thought to cherish!" murmured Lettice, with a little shiver that was not entirely born of chilliness. "Yet, now you have touched on that point, I can see how blind we all have been! For many long weeks we have been lying under the shadow of what almost seemed a curse! Each time our hopes revived, something was sure to happen to cast them down again! Oh! if we had only received an earlier warning! If we had— Mr. Darling?"

"Yes, Miss Acton?" replied the detective, startled by her sudden change of tone.

"Do you believe those men—the fiends you caught spreading the fire—were allies of the villain you call Jonah?"

"Why do you ask that?" hesitated Darling.

"How can I help asking, rather! They tried to kill you—was it because they suspected your purpose? Was it—had our being in the bottoms, anything to do with their spreading the flames faster?"

Up to that very instant, this truly startling idea had never once occurred to the detective, but now—was it true? Were those dastardly firebugs actually trying to compass death, as well as devastation?

The bare thought sent a cold shiver through his frame, but he was able to hide this, as well as to disguise his own ugly suspicions. It would never do to admit as much to Lettice, whose bodily powers had already been so terribly strained.

"You amaze me, dear friend!" he declared, playing the part to perfection. "The trick was bad enough in itself, I'll admit, but neither of the fellows I run across wore horns above their temples—and only devils could attempt murder after that fashion! No, Miss Acton," his tones growing a bit evener, like one who is recovering from a shock of surprise. "Those fellows were simple Sooners, working against your colony, hoping to starve them out by sweeping off all food for the stock. Bad enough, I grant, yet less evil than you fancied."

Lettice said nothing. She closed her eyes, leaning back against the sheltering roots, her eyes closed, seemingly lost in thought.

Dandy Darling was content that it should be thus. He, too, had ample food for thought, not only in that startling suggestion, but in the matters which he had touched gingerly upon, just before.

So deeply were both thinking, that neither caught those guarded sounds, rapidly drawing nearer the drift. Then a challenge came:

"I say—you critters on the drift!"

CHAPTER XIX.

A CHOICE OF EVILS.

DANDY DARLING lifted his drooping head with a jerk as that call came from—whence?

Not from shore, for the words were too distinct, the tones too clear for that. Plainly, whoever

hailed them must be on the bosom of the river itself, but toward which point of the compass?

While being called a good conductor of scoundrels, water is a most deceptive medium, particularly by night, and especially when one is taken wholly off his guard, as was the case with the Daisy Detective in this instance.

His ears were keen enough, and his wits perfectly clear, yet for the life of him he could not decide as to the correct direction; up or down, right or left of the drift on which they had found such a timely, yet uncertain, refuge.

Nor did his eyes serve him any better, though he flashed a swift, searching glance around in those first startled moments. The bright glow of the little fire which had no doubt guided the man who hailed them to that quarter, shortened his vision, by making the gloom beyond its immediate vicinity seem more intense.

There was another method of finding out what he wished to know, and for lack of a better, Dandy Darling accepted it.

"Well, why don't you keep on saying?" he called out, stretching both arms and legs, like one just roused from an agreeable doze.

"What ye doin' thar, anyway?"

It was the same voice: coarse, harsh, giving one the impression of a far from agreeable owner, through the sense of hearing alone.

It came from only a short distance up the stream, pretty well in a line with the drift, and with that for a guide, Dandy Darling contrived to distinguish a dim, shadowy something which doubtless was a boat of some description.

When there appears to be a pressing need of it, the brain of a cool, quick-witted man can crowd a marvelous amount of thinking into the span of a very few seconds. This was the case with Dandy Darling just now.

He had discounted pretty much what now promised to occur, before permitting his humanity to overcome his prudence. He knew that if any evil characters were still abroad in that neighborhood, they could hardly be expected to fail of seeing that bright light on the bosom of the river; and even if they were not looking for any particular game, curiosity alone would prove quite sufficient to induce them to make an investigation.

Even when he kindled the fire, he knew he was working dead against his own interests, and more than suspected that he might be showing a cruel mercy to Lettice herself.

Why had one of those hidden watchers under the river bank been so bent on investigating the sounds given forth by the poor horse which had carried them through the bath of fire? Why had "the boss" given them orders, the carrying out of which implied so much care and risk?

One of the unseen speakers had as good as intimated they were there for the express purpose of intercepting or capturing some person or persons. Then—had their "boss" discounted the very vague possibility of some person or persons being caught between the fire and the river, whose escape was to be cut off by these fellows?

Against all this, with numerous other reasons which had fully as much force to his notion, Dandy Darling had deliberately started that fire, daring the danger rather than see Lettice Acton suffer from cold which it was in his power to at least mitigate.

Now, he more than half believed that the very danger he had from the outset foreseen, was fairly upon them, and his wits were working with wonderful rapidity, trying to plan a way through the tangle.

On one point he had not the slightest doubt; the man who hailed them did not belong to the Big Buffalo Colony. If he had, what a vastly different tone his voice would have taken! How differently would his salutation have been couched.

Although taken completely by surprise, it was only for a single instant, then the Daisy Detective was wholly on the alert, his slightest action having its especial meaning.

So with his start of seeming awakening. So with his stretching yawn, for as his feet went out, one of them dislodged the brightest burning brand, rolling it over from the log into a crack, where it lost its flame, simply sending up a curl of smoke instead of casting its dangerous beams upon his now exposed countenance.

So with his second mighty yawn, as he slowly rose to his feet by the side of the little fire, for under its cover he swiftly whispered a warning to Lettice, who had likewise been startled from her thoughts by that coarse hail.

"Not a word—leave all to me, if you love life!"

He dared say no more, but that was enough to check the joyous cry which was rising in the throat of the maiden; enough to drop her head once more against those broken roots, frightened, bewildered, half swooning through powerful emotions.

"I didn't—just catch—that last, pardner!" the Daisy Detective managed to jerk forth between yawns, as it were, "If you're not in too big a hurry, couldn't you sling it at me again?"

"I axed ye, what ye doin' thar, humped up atop a drift like a mud-turtle sunnin' hisself!" came the response, ending with a laugh that

was even less agreeable to the than the first call.

"Oh—is that it?" drawled Dandy Darling, still playing for time, and talking with his tongue while his brain was doing the real work.

"I reckon! But ef it's too mighty much fer a p'lite answer, don't break yer back, stranger!"

"I'll do my level best to—not!" laughed the Daisy Detective, switching to another track. "And as one good turn deserves another, who might you be, your own self?"

"Boomers, driv' out by the big fire," was the instant reply. "Had a powerful close call, an' just manidged to git off with the ba'r on our heads. Au' you all?"

"Out for a pleasure sail by moonlight!" promptly declared Darling, "taking the curse off!" by an laughing lightly.

"Waal, you're a case, you be!"

"Of pickles—don't dip me back into the brine, if you love me!" exclaimed Darling, as the skiff touched the drift at a safe point near the upper edge, but where the current glanced harmlessly along the side of the boat, instead of striking it directly.

The feat was deftly performed, as had been the work of the two men at the oars ever since that curious parley opened. They had easily held their own against the current, only dropping down by gentle degrees toward the drift as their spokesman gave them signs.

"I'm holdin' a thin-shelled aig atwixt the skiff an' the drift, stranger, an' ef you ketch a jar hefty 'nough to make a bu'st, I'll eat my ole hat! Bat—ain't that a gal, yender in the shade o' them roots?"

A note of intense surprise took the place of his clumsy jesting, and the fellow seemed on the point of springing from the boat upon the drift. If such was his intention, he abandoned it after a glance toward the detective.

Not that Darling looked so ferocious, but while his arms were akimbo, in seeming ease, his fingers were curled about the butts of his heavy revolvers.

"There is a lady here, yes; but—" began Darling, only to be cut short by Lettice Acton herself.

Suffering, sick at heart and brain, tortured by apprehensions on behalf of her friends, suffering from cold and half-distracted by that dull, menacing roar and gurgle of the breaking current, the poor girl could wait no longer on that seemingly frivolous waste of time. And rising to her knees, she held out her trembling hands toward the boat, brokenly crying:

"Help us, if you are men! I'm so cold—so miserable! Take me back to Uncle Hi—to brother, I beg of you!"

"Goo'l land o' livin'!" ejaculated the man in the boat, starting back as though he had found himself suddenly confronted with a ghost. "Ef it ain't—ain't that Hi Powell's leetle gal?"

"Yes—his girl!" almost sobbed Lettice, nodding in choked, hardly articulate tones. "You know him? He is—Nothing evil has happened to him?"

"A friend to Hiram Powell?" cried Dandy Darling, briskly, yet with a touch of mild reproach in his voice as he added: "Why didn't you say so before? Why keep us on fish-books of suspense and— Of course Uncle Hi is all right, Miss Acton, and so'll you be, now these honest fellows have come to our rescue!"

"You're mighty right!" laughed the fellow, pleasure seeming to obliterate his surprise. "That's jest what we're hyar fer, an' ef that's 'nother livin' man on two legs as I'd ruther do a favor fer then that same Hi Powell, then I'd jest like to know!"

There were only three men in the boat; two at the oars, but who were now holding fast to the drift with one hand each, and the fellow who had done all the talking for their side.

The oarsmen appeared to be very little troubled by curiosity, for if they had taken the trouble to scrutinize the castaways, they must have done so while still clear of the drift; certainly they had not turned their heads for a square look since striking it.

And Dandy Darling could say but little better for the spokesman, so far as recognition was concerned. His hat was slouched over his eyes, and his face itself appeared to be muffled up after a fashion hardly required for warmth or comfort on such a night.

Neither of the trio seemed suspicious enough of danger to think it necessary to handle their weapons, and Darling knew he could easily reduce the odds against him to zero, if he saw fit to open fire. And, despite their claim of being honest Boomers, driven to water by fire, he was pretty thoroughly convinced they were anything else.

Still, Lettice had appealed to them for aid; he could not take her to land, himself, without killing these three men, or bluffing them off by swimming. At the very worst, she had nothing to fear for her life in their hands, and it was his duty to think first of her safety.

It was another swift bit of thinking, and Lettice had not yet fairly gained her uncertain footing, when Dandy Darling sprung to her assistance, scattering the remnant of fire by a (seemingly) blundering step as he did so.

"Gently, Miss Acton!" he exclaimed in warning, catching one hand in his, then passing a supporting arm about her waist. "Whoever built this flooring was in too big a hurry for his pay to think of sweeping away the superfluous odds and ends!"

"Waal, ef you ain't a queer 'un, then I wouldn't say so!" cried the fellow acting as spokesman, bursting into a hearty guffaw. "The lady is all right, an' bein' the gal of my ole side pard, Hi Powell, is heap sight welkimer'n a squar' meal to a starvin' tramp! But—waal, I ain't nigh so sure 'bout you, stranger!"

"Steady, ma'am!" first testing the loose sticks before his fair charge with his own weight. "Meaning—what, stranger?"

"You talk so mighty like a crazy critter that I don't know jest how to take ye—that's all!" chuckled the other, adding as an afterthought, "Or ef I'd orter take ye 'tall! Eh, lads?"

"Thar's room enough, I reckon," gruffly observed one of the oarsmen.

"That does settle it, an' you're booked for a fu'st-class passage, stranger! Now—stiddy! An' ef you'll jest lend me one o' yer weenty han's, mum, why—like a book!"

Between them, the two men performed the feat of transferring Lettice from the drift to the boat in safety, Dandy Darling retaining a firm hold of her waist and arm until he saw her feet safely touch the bottom of the skiff, when he relaxed his grasp and stepped back, not to hinder the spokesman in completing the delicate task.

But the fellow gave the maiden a rough shove that sent her fulling between the two oarsmen, at the same time jerking forth a revolver and opening fire on the Daisy Detective.

"Down, dug-gun ye!" he snarled, viciously. "Go tell the devil I sent ye fer comp'ny!"

CHAPTER XX.

"THAR'S YOUR HONEY, BOSS!"

With a short, choked cry, Dandy Darling flung up his arms and fell—but the single step he was taking when that treacherous attack was made, plunged him through an opening between two logs, into the sullenly growling current.

Blinded by the glare from his own weapon, the assassin did not at first realize this, and wasted at least one of his three bullets before the truth flashed upon him.

"Back! pull back, ye devils!" he snarled as the skiff obeyed the impulse of the current when no longer held fast, and began slipping away from the drift. "Back, I say! It's the Daisy Detective, an' I've got to make dead sure work this time! Back, ye devils!"

Dan Devoe—for he was the spokesman—was wasting considerable breath in his excitement, for his mates were prompt to obey orders. But some allowance must be made for his having held his savage hatred and lust for revenge so long in check, even risking the loss of his own reward by holding the wishes of his master first in place.

But now that Lettice Acton began to realize what treacherous work was being wrought, she uttered a shriek of horror, and struggled so desperately in her efforts to regain her footing, that the boat came very near being upset. Devoe nearly pitched headlong into the water, as he crouched, leaning forward, pistol in hand, his eyes glowing like balls of greenish fire as they sought to distinguish the form of his enemy.

"Grab her—you!" growled one of the oarsmen to his mate, then sending the skiff safely back to its original position, where he deftly secured a hold that kept it steady.

Devoe sprung upon the drift with a grating snarl, bending over the narrow opening through which Dandy Darling had dropped before his lead.

Nothing was to be seen in that gloom, but his lowered hand touched nothing save flowing water and the slippery sides of the logs.

"Keep all eyes skinned, boys! Ef he comes up below the drift, yell out an' we'll ketch the slipp'y critter even yit!" he cried groping about with his unarmed hand until his fingers closed on a long stick, crooked at one end, which promised to answer his purpose.

Thrusting this into the opening, Devoe worked it around in every direction, on the chance of feeling the body of the detective in case it had become entangled by his garments catching on a protruding snag, or held by the current against a log lying lower in the water than its fellows.

Foiled in that hope, he crossed the drift, lying low and sweeping the comparatively smooth surface of the river with his eyes, seemingly doubled in keenness by his fierce passions.

Nothing that could possibly be mistaken for dead body or living swimmer was within his range of vision.

"Ketch sight o' ary thing, boys?" he called out.

"Nary! Reckon your lead must 'a' sunk the critter, Dan!"

"My lead never stopped inside o' the devil, fer I blowed him clean through, every clatter!" was the response.

"I reckon ye did, Danny, but ef ye did, what's

the sense in lookin' fer his karkidge? I know ye hated him wuss'n p'izen, but killin' is killin', an' ye can't do that more'n once to the same critter, even ef he be a devil."

"Don't I know that, dug-gun ye?" growled Devoe, relinquishing his vain search below the drift, rising to his feet and stamping violently at different points, like one striving to shake the entire structure loose.

"I say, Devoe," called out the second oarsman, to whose rough hands poor Lettice had been consigned for the time being. "'Pears like this dainty chicken has gone fainty—if she hain't hopped the twig in good earnest!"

"Durn the gall! She kin wait a bit. I want to find that Daisy Detective, Leap sight wuss then all the petticoats this side o' Utah!"

"Didn't ye kill the critter, say?"

"Sure as he's a dead devil now, 'stead of a livin' imp!"

"Then, what more do ye want?"

"His skelp, dug-gun him!" viciously snarled the firebug, fairly frothing at the mouth with excess of fury. "His skelp to w'air as a healin'-plaster on this jawbone he giv' me—double cuss him all over! That's what I want, an' that's jest what I'm gwine to her, too!"

The sanguinary ruffian was in deadly earnest, but anticipation is not always gratification, and so it proved in this case. Though Devoe doggedly persisted in his search, probing every hole through which he could thrust a stick, at the same time keeping an eye on the river below the two snags to make sure the coveted prize did not escape him by floating away unseen, until long after the patience of his mates was completely exhausted, nothing came of it.

He only desisted, at length, when the men in the boat swore angrily that rather than wait longer they would pull off and leave him to play fish or alligator when he came to his common senses.

"An' it's Dan Devoe as'll hev to answer the boss when he axes why in time we let the gal croak—not us!"

"That's what!"

"You don't know the critter like I do, or you'd help hunt him up, ruther than chaw wind the way you've bin doin'!" growled Devoe, coming back to the boat, but pausing at its side for another lingering look over the drift and down the river.

"Didn't you sw'ar you blowed him clean through, fu'st clatter?"

"An' ain't once killin' good as a dozen?"

"I blowed him through—yes! But I wanted to see the hole with the own two eyes o' me! I wanted to lift his skelp an' saw off his head an' rip him in two parts!"

More fiend than Lunan the firebug looked and seemed, just then, as he snarlingly poured forth those sickening sentences, one foot resting in the boat, but the other clinging to the drift which he was so reluctant to abandon without more perfect assurance that his dastardly work was complete.

Even his fellows, rough, crime-hardened sinners though they both were, actually shrank from him in aversion, one of the pair growling:

"Git in, er git out—an' out fer choice, ef you're gwine to keep up sech redidless slaughter-pen talk as them!"

He gave the skiff a reckless shove away from the drift, and Devoe barely escaped taking a sudden bath, by tumbling awkwardly into the bow of the boat as the current caught and swept it around.

"Drunk, or jest crazy, Danny?" laughed the second oarsman, resuming his former occupation, leaving Lettice lying in the stern, more like a bundle of clothing, only, than a living, suffering human being.

"You kin crack your jokes all you like: I'd ruther hev them then sech howlin's as you pelted me with back yender," gruffly uttered the firebug, dexterously balancing himself and passing back to the stern, though his mates were forced to cease rowing while he crossed their thwarts.

"Wasn't it 'nough fer to make a sick cat yowl, let lone a human? Ef you was so dead set on keepin' hold o' the critter, why didn't ye wait ontel he was farly in the boat?"

"Beca'se, ef I hed, it's big odds the rest o' us 'd a' tumbled out in a holy hurry!" with a short, grim laugh. "I tell ye, boys, you don't even begin to know how p'izen slipp'y that devil on wheels was!"

"Waal, ef we ain't findin' out, 'tain't the fault o' your chin, Dav."

The speaker heaved such a lugubrious sigh, that his fellow oarsman chuckled in high glee. And what growlings or argument failed to accomplish, this turn of ridicule effected.

Dan Devoe dropped the subject, taking one long, wistful, but vain look along the river, now beginning to glisten a bit in spots and streaks as the stars came through the fading clouds, and the moon to shed a dim light over the earth.

With this look he abandoned all hopes of recovering the body of his hated and feared foe, turning his attention to the unconscious maiden, lifting her into a more comfortable position.

Beyond assuring himself that she was not dead, but merely in an ordinary swoon, or cast into stupor by the terror of that foul assassination, Devoe gave himself no further trouble.

"She'll keep, I reckon, an' I'd ruther tote a woman clean, then hev to tug an' coax, too!" he grimly growled.

Neither of his mates replied to this observation, bending their attention to the oars, sending the boat rapidly across the river from that stretch of flame-blackened bottoms, striking land nearly opposite the pile of driftwood, though only their intimate knowledge of the locality told them as much. Now the fire had entirely died out, there was no beacon to mark the position of the drift.

When the landing was effected, Dan Devoe lost little time in conveying the insensible maiden up the bank, pressing through the timber for some little distance to where a small campfire was burning, by the side of which half-reclined Captain Kay Vaux, who rose at his coming.

"Thar's your honey, boss!" grinned Devoe, laying Lettice at his feet.

"Wasn't the Daisy Detective with her? Where is he now?"

"At the bottom o' the river, bait fer catfish, Cap'n Kay!"

CHAPTER XXI.

THE BITTEREST BLOW OF ALL.

IT will be remembered that when Clark Frazer first detected signs of trouble back at the camp which the Big Buffalo Boomers had left to go in search of their missing friends, he not only shouted forth the alarm, but emptied the cylinder of one of his revolvers as rapidly as a nervous finger could work the trigger.

His only thought was to the more surely and the more rapidly rally his men for a rush to the rescue or assistance of their women and children; but he was doing far more than he had any idea of, just then.

It was this racket that cut short the talk between Christine Brockelmyer and John Clegg. And those shouts, those shots, suddenly bursting forth on the night only a few score yards from the buffalo-hole to which, under heaven, Fred Acton owed his almost miraculous escape from horrible death, roused that young fellow from the death-like stupor into which he had fallen after crawling out of the heated puddle of water.

It would be almost too much to assert that the sudden outburst of shouting and shooting brought him back to consciousness; it caused his head to lift, his eyes to stare vacantly about, his scorched frame to show itself capable of motion; but that was about all, at first.

Although his senses were restored, his sense still lay dormant!

Christine and Clegg lost little time in following after the Boomers, though they proceeded more leisurely, and only reached the desolated camp after the tough fight for the fragments was fairly over.

Although he was still nearer the point where the search-party turned back, Fred Acton did not reach camp until day was just dawning.

It took time to rally from such a shock as he had received, and even after he was able to realize much of what had taken place since leaving camp in hopes of winning a bride before his return, it was long before the poor fellow could rally strength or courage to attempt his way back to where the broken bridge marked the beginning of such a horrible chain of adventures.

Being young, and madly in love, even the loss of his sister could not keep him from thinking mainly of his poor Christine.

"If I might only have died with her, since saving her dear life was impossible!" he moaned, time and time again, during that slow, painful, even reluctant tramp back toward camp.

For through his own wretchedness, he now and then remembered what a terrible blow he must deliver Uncle Hi Powell, to whom bright-eyed, cheery, loving Letty was dearer than all the world beside!

This sickening dread was strongest when Fred Acton came within sight of the desolate camp, and sealed his lips when he would have uttered a shout to announce his return.

What was there to show excitement over? Why should he shout, when a wail would be so much more appropriate? How dared he even think of bidding for their joyous congratulations, when he deserved their angry curses far more?

Had he not lived, while they died?

It is no easy matter to clearly set forth a state of mind like this, but the effort had to be made, if only to in part explain why Acton was creeping, almost stealing, into the ruined camp when he caught his first glimpse of Christine Brockelmyer, living, breathing, moving, never looking more charming in all her life, despite the somewhat dilapidated state of her usually neat, trim costume.

Christine was slowly moving toward the gulch, to view the wreck by the first light of dawn, and her back was partly turned toward the half-stupefied young man, whose first wild fancy was that he beheld the spirit of his lost love.

That did not last long; even his partially shattered brain could fail of grasping the glorious truth but a little while. Then, with a low, choking cry of intense joy, Fred Acton darted

forward with his arms outstretched, his powers of both body and mind restored.

"Christine, my love, my angel! Christine—alive!"

It was this wild cry that roused the Boomers, turning all eyes in that direction, just in time to recognize Fred Acton as he sprung forward—to see Christine Brockelmyer turn swiftly, recoiling—then see her clinched hand dash itself squarely into the face of her joy-crazed lover!

"Go 'vay mit you!" she cried, her voice shrill with indignation, as Fred Acton recoiled from that cruel blow. "I haff me nottings more to do by you! I vhants me not—go 'vay, I says me some more!"

"Christine—my love—"

A shrill, mocking laugh broke in upon his hoarse speech, and instead of recoiling further as one from contact with a half-feared, half-loathed object, the German girl advanced a pace, her right hand quivering with anger as it lifted, her left turned into a fist and thrown backward to serve as a balance to her lithe, passionate body.

"Your loaf! How vhas your loaf come out of dot pan-out, eh? Vhas it a sign of loaf dot a mans he roons avay a voomans for when she wants his help more as neffer? Vhas it a sign of loaf dot a boy-mans dumbles a voomans oafer herself, und vorgets to sthop yost a leedle while long enough to bick her on dose veet up ag'in? Vhas it—oh, you vhas talking by your moudth, und dot makes me so dired I vhas all oafer go schleebing in a cat-vink?"

With astonishing rapidity Christine poured forth these sentences, the flood of words, if not exactly eloquence, actually stunning poor Fred Acton, who could hardly believe his senses.

What had he done to deserve such a viragoish reception? What—

But Christine seemed resolved to give him no opportunity for explanation, defense or retort, for, with a passionate gesture of scorn, she turned about and ran swiftly toward a tall, somewhat slouching, yet manly form: that belonged to John Clegg.

By this time pretty near all the little colony knew that yet another one of those given over for dead had returned, alive and only superficially injured. And realizing this, it was only natural that, as they crowded around Fred Acton, their hopes concerning Lettice should likewise revive.

Where was she? Could they be of any help? How did he escape from that sea of fire? And why had he been so late in getting back?

The flood of questions, mingled with hearty congratulations on his wonderful escape, with hand-shaking and shoulder-clapping, kept Acton almost too busy for speech during the next few minutes. But then, when Uncle Hiram Powell claimed possession of his boy, all the other Boomers gave way, and in the silent, yet intense grief of the veteran, Fred forgot something of his own woes for the time being.

Meanwhile, Christine was the center of attraction for the curious Boomers, both male and female, all eager to learn the reasons for her strange reception of one whom, up to the day before, nearly every member of the colony had regarded as her accepted lover.

"I say me notting more," was her response, with a shake of the head so emphatic as to send her flaxen braids flying, almost snapping like the crackers of a brace of whips. "I would half said me notting den, but when a play-man like dose, yump at mo' his arms out, und try to kiss me my mouth oafer—dot makes me madt all oafer!"

She clung to John Clegg, and John Clegg seemed to constitute himself her guardian for the occasion. They took their morning meal separate from the rest, and altogether matters seemed to point toward a change of love affairs radical enough to interest even the male portion of the colony.

It had been decided to do nothing as a body, until the return of Clark Frazer and a chosen companion, who had set out toward the hills, in the direction of which the marauders had ridden with their plunder from the wrecked camp. This departure had been taken just before the return of Fred Acton, and now that breakfast had been eaten, the Boomers were looking to the weapons, and watching for the return of their lieutenant-commander, bringing information by which they might know what step to take next.

But the storm stirred up by the return of Fred Acton had not yet blown itself out, though many were deceived by that temporary lull.

As soon as he could tear himself away from Uncle Hi—sovereign shaken by the loss of his idolized Letty, and suffering not a little from that cruel stroke from the pistol of Captain Kay Vaux—the half-distracted lover once more sought out his fickle love, in hopes of clearing away the terrible misunderstanding which had so strangely come between them.

It was no difficult task to bring about a meeting, for the flames had left no cover, no hiding-place in that vicinity, and only by taking to actual flight, or by entering the gulch itself, could Christine have evaded her one-time favored suitor.

She was in no frame of mind for open flight,

though she did give Acton ample warning to keep his distance, by lifting her hand and crying out, almost harshly:

"Keep your vay off, Mr. Acton! I vhants me no more druck mit you! I haff me my eyes vide open, now, und I vind me oudt dose differences betwixt a boy-vool-mans, und a mans all oafer—like my Yohn!"

That was the last feather, and Acton cried out harshly:

"Curse your John! Let him come between me and my love, and I'll let the whole world know which is the true man!"

John Clegg was not far away, and at that hot speech he slouched a little nearer, showing his teeth a bit, but outwardly cool as Fred was heated.

"Sence my name happens to begin with John, mebbe I'm the hoss you want to curry, Mister Fred Acton?"

"No, no!" cried Christine, wildly motioning the Boomer back, then facing Fred, her blue eyes flashing, her face alive with hot indignation. "You vill make me speak right out, Mr. Acton? You vill force me to expose you before all these—your own peoples?"

"What have I to conceal, Christine?" huskily demanded Fred, his mad love smothering even his hot rage. "Not my great love for you, as—"

Lithe as a panther, Christine sprung forward, lightly smiting the young man across the lips with an open hand, then darting back again to the side of her grinning champion.

"So much I giff me for your loaf, Frederick Acton!" she cried, her tones full of bitter scorn. "So much I loaf me the bitiful goward who leaf a poor weak voomans to die herself alone, if a true mans—my Yohn!—vbas not come to helb her dot fire outside of!"

"My God!" gasped Acton, turning ghastly pale, trembling like a leaf as he realized the full force of this blow, all the more stunning because dealt by the hand of her whom he loved so wildly. "Christine! You do not—you cannot believe that!"

"Christine can believe more dings now as she offer dreamed of before dot fire come down! Den, she neffer belief you vhas a goward-curl! Den, she neffer belief you vould dramble her down like a no-count, your own feet under, the better dot you safe your own self dot fire avay from! Now—Christine knows all dot, Mr. Acton!"

"Christine, in the name of heaven! what has come over you? You do not mean to charge me with such miserable cowardice?"

"What vhas you doing when dose fire preaks out, Mr. Acton?" coldly sneered the merciless woman. "Wait—I tells efferybody! You vhas laughing by him!" swinging one hand around and swiftly tapping Clegg on the breast as she added: "You vhas trying to make me dink him a no-goot! You vhas rooning him down—him! the man who comes head foorst dose fire drough, yoost to safe the poor girls you roon avay from to yourself safen!"

The Boomers had gathered around the trio, hardly as yet able to comprehend what was wrong, though something of that bitter accusation was making itself felt, and almost instinctively those nearest Fred Acton began to edge away from him, even while unable to wholly credit the words Christine poured forth so fiercely, yet contemptuously.

Acton felt, rather than saw this recoil, and it drove him fairly wild with rage and shame. He could not strike a woman—at least of all the women whom he had loved so passionately; whom he still loved far better than his own life. But John Clegg was grinning broadly, and he was a man, at least in outward semblance.

"You devil!" snarled Acton, leaping full at his throat.

CHAPTER XXII.

A CHANGE OF COMMANDERS.

WITH a shrill scream, Christine Brockelmyer darted to one side as Fred Acton leaped forward, doubtless believing his rage was directed toward her in particular, but his quivering fingers shot out for the hairy throat of John Clegg instead.

The tall Boomer was taken completely by surprise, staggering back before that savage attack, almost falling to the ground before he could brace himself and collect his energies for the fight.

Clutching his throat with one hand, the frenzied youth rained half a dozen heavy blows into that startled face before Clegg could do aught in self-defense.

But then, with a hoarse, choking roar of bursting rage, the Boomer grappled with his slender antagonist, twisting him from his feet and falling heavily upon him, the shock dashing those throttling fingers from his bleeding throat.

"Fair play! Keep back—the hull o' ye!" yelled forth Jesse Rudge, a young Boomer who was credited with being an aspirant after the hand of the charming Christine himself. "Let 'em fight it out, now it's come to that! Fair play, I say!" wildly flourishing his revolver as the surest method of emphasizing his words.

"Drash him, Yohn!" screamed Christine,

clapping her hands violently. "Broke him who vhas a real man! Drash him—drash him all oaser!"

Thoroughly maddened by what he deemed an entirely unwarranted assault, and stinging smartly from the blows received while off his guard, John Clegg did his level best to obey the fair virago.

Holding the young man helpless beneath his greater weight, he quickly secured a throat-hold, then used his other hand to rain cruel blows full upon that bared face.

It was a sickening sight, and more than one woman fled, shivering and heart-sick. But none of the Boomers interfered. Fred Acton had begun the fight, and he must be the first to quit it.

So the majority reasoned, though, with those sinewy fingers savagely closing his throat, it was difficult to see how the over-matched lad could gain breath enough to "holler enough" with.

But Uncle Hi, roused from his half-stupor by the tumult, rushed forward, taking in the whole scene at a single glance. And as its full force struck him, his brain cleared, his old-time powers came back, and he sprang to the rescue with hearty good will.

"Let up, John Clegg!" he thundered, one hand jerking the maddened Boomer back by a grip on his shaggy poll, the other arresting that descending fist, already covered with blood. "Let up or—I'll break your arm, and pull the whole head off o' ye!"

With a hoarse cry as both head and arm went back, Clegg yielded, and hurling him forcibly on his back, the aroused wagon boss cried:

"Take a man o' your own size an' heft, John Clegg! I'm your match, ef the pore crippled boy ain't! Lick me, ef ye must lick anybody!"

"He jumped me when I wasn't lookin', Uncle Hi," mumbled Clegg.

"And I'll jump you again, you cowardly cur and liar!" wildly panted Acton, staggering dizzily to his feet. "I'll have your black heart's blood for stealing away—"

But Uncle Hi clapped a hand over those bruised lips, forcing the half-crazed youth away from the spot.

John Clegg made no effort to intercept them. Indeed, he seemed a bit ashamed of himself, now he had time to think at all. Although too true a man to vaunt his own prowess over-much, he knew that Fred Acton was nothing like his match, physically speaking.

"I wouldn't a' lifted a finger ag'inst him, men, ef he hedn't come at me so like a mad-eat," he began, apologetically; when Christine flung her arms about him, terror and apprehension in her big blue eyes as she panted, brokenly:

"Oh, Yohn—my Yohn! You hear him say—I hear him say dot! Oh, Yohn: you must a sharp look keeb outd vor him! He say be kill—I fear me mooch he vill do dot, too!"

"Jest a whiffet yelpin', Christine," laughed Clegg, openly hugging the young woman in his delight at this fresh proof of her affection. "He won't kill nobody. I licked him too easy—that's all!"

"Hemp sight to crow over, hain't it?" sneered Jesse Rudge, fired by jealousy to see the woman he himself adored showering such open caresses upon a rival. "You hate-licked a pore cripple, but you cain't crow over the hull camp, John Clegg! Ef ye ax it right sweet, mebbe I mought p'int out a better man then you ever dast to dream o' bein'!"

Perhaps it was fortunate for more than one, that Clark Frazer returned at this precise juncture, and a better man for quelling an incipient riot never trod in leather.

Christine, too, shifted her position as few not of the gentle sex can without awkwardness, standing midway between the rivals, an open hand turned toward each, her blue eyes flashing from one to the other as she spoke swiftly, peremptorily:

"Stop! make me no more troubles! I schwear me dot good book on top of, dot I vill me neffer again von time easen speak unto close man who makes some more fight! I vill neffer more be a friendt by him as kicks a row up—so help me all oaser!"

John Clegg was well content with the reward he had already received, and Jesse Rudge was too shrewd to waste his last frail chance of winning Christine, to fly in the face of her stern commands. And so quiet was once more restored and peace reigned, outwardly at least.

In their natural eagerness to learn what discoveries, if any, their scouts had made, the Boomers gathered together around Clark Frazer, for the time being forgetting that unfortunate affray.

There was little to hear. The scouts had found nothing, for though they had made their way to the hills, where the fire had died out from lack of light fuel, they had not even come across the ghost of a trail.

"But that ain't sech a mighty drawback," Frazer hastened to say, noting how dejected those smoke-streaked faces grew at his announcement. "Of course the fire would blot out all sech signs by buruin' off the grass, an' the old fog was too thick a carpet fer a hoss to cut his huff through, clean enough to make a

dent in the ground itself: we tried that, by el'arin' away the ashes."

"But ef they ain't no trail to be diskivered, what show hev we o'er gittin' back our critters?" gloomily asked a Boomer.

"Tba'r ain't no trail on the flats, 'cept what we made in goin' an' comin', but unless the devils hed extra wings to fit onto our animals, how you reckon they could take 'em through the hills 'thout leavin' sign enough fer keen eyes to pick up?"

"You didn't pick up none, anyway!"

"Fer why: thar was jest us two. We could easy eat a hole our own bigness, ef we was to be jumped by the imps, but how'd that s'arve you, back hyar?" grimly laughed Frazer. "No. We didn't foller fur into the hills, jest makin' sure, by a circumambibus comin' back, that the imps never come down from the hills ag'in, anyway on this side o' the slope."

"I'm not doubtin' much but that we kin hit off the trail, when we git good an' ready; but it ain't any two lone men that wants to do the follerin' up, 'less they're tired of livin'. You'd arter know that. It means fight, clean through, with them imps as with us. Tha'r last night's work proves it plain enough!"

Having put the case fairly before his comrades, Clark Frazer asked for each man to advance his opinion as to what would be their proper course to follow. Then, when all had spoken, they could place the most favored plan before their chief, Hiram Powell, for his approval or dissent.

It was at this point that Uncle Hi put in an appearance, looking more like his usual self, despite his haggard eyes and his bandaged head.

"Jest in time, boss," cried Frazer, delightedly, his own spirits rising higher as he recognized that keen, alert, if stern expression. "Thar haint no lackin' o' tails amongst us, but we hedn't no head ontel you showed up."

"It's a badly cracked head, Frazer!"

"But wu'th more'n all the rest, ef I do say it, Uncle Hi!" was the laughing, but earnest response. "You're boss: what shell we do fu'st?"

"Unite on another wagon boss," was the instant response.

"We don't want any other, Uncle Hi. Why should we, with you to the fore?" almost indignantly interposed Frazer.

"Because you can't have me, even if I felt fit to command, which I don't," was the cold response. "I'd be a hurt, rather than a help. I have one of my children back, as from the grave, but the other is still missing, and until I find my—until I know the whole truth, glad or sorry, sweet or bitter, I can have but one aim in life.

"I wish you good luck, friends, even as I ask your good wishes to follow and sustain me in my search for Letty! I'm going, now, but if I can influence you in the least, you'll elect Clark Frazer as your head from this time on."

Without waiting for reply or word, Hiram Powell turned away, silently watched by the Boomers. They saw him approach Fred Acton, who rose at his coming, then sent an encouraging cheer after, as the two men strode away.

CHAPTER XXIII. THE DOOM OF BIG BUFFALO.

DAN DEVOE mouthed his words after a fashion that betrayed a fiendish delight in the fish-bait transaction, and suspicious though he was by training as well as by nature, Captain Kay Vaux could not well doubt the perfect sincerity with which the firebug spoke.

Letting the question rest for the moment, he said nothing in reply, bending low enough to gain a fair look into the face of the maiden. Although the heat and fatigue through which she had been compelled to pass, had in a degree marred her beauty, the chief of the Big Buffalo Gang had no trouble in identifying Lettice Acton.

As he gazed, a change crept into his own face. The stern, almost harsh lines seemed to soften. The vivid, almost savage fire paled in his black eyes. And as Dan Devoe closely noted those changes, he made a mental note for his future guidance.

Captain Kay Vaux passed from gazing to action, first assuring himself that the maiden was indeed living, though seemingly bound by a spell or trance; he was wise enough to decide that it was no ordinary swoon, by her manner of breathing and by her pulse.

Picking Lettice up in his arms, he passed by the little campfire, which had, seemingly, been started for his sole benefit, pausing when a little beyond the narrow circle of light thus cast upon the gloom reigning there beneath the trees.

"I say, you Dingley!"

"Right on hand, captain!" was the prompt response, as a slender, wiry, gray-bearded member of the gang sprung forward.

"See what's the matter with this lady, will you?" added Vaux, resigning his new prize to the fellow's care. "Lady, I said, Doc."

"I heard you, captain, and lady it is."

"Don't let that fact slip your memory, then. There's a treasure wrapped up in that smoky bundle, but it's waiting for my signature before

any lesser light can even come within sight; you save, Doc?"

"My ears are wide open, captain."

"That's all right, then. No nonsense; do your level best to bring Miss Acton 'round in style, and I'll go your bail the next time you're charged with killing another patient. See?"

Dingley silently bowed, and with a short, careless laugh, Captain Vaux returned to where he had left Dan Devoe.

"Fish-bait, you said, Danny? Since you were never known to lie, of course that's gospel. But—if this be true, why is it true?"

Devoe hesitated a little, for he saw that his chief was in one of his peculiar moods, and no man could with any degree of certainty predict the weather from moment to moment while that fit lasted. When he smiled the brightest and purred the softest, then the lightning might be forming and the thunderbolt being forged.

Knowing all this, and recalling how viciously Vaux had raged on a former occasion because he and Billy Blue had permitted the Daisy Detective to escape their bullets, Devoe felt that his safest course lay along the line of truth, and shaped his answer accordingly:

"Twasn't beca'se I hold any dirty grudge ag'in the catties, ye want to know, boss, fer I've done ett my sheer, an' I reckon to git away with a heap sight more afore my teeth go back onto me. But—waal, the pizen critter fooled me once; two times in the span o' one day'd make me too almighty sick! So—I jest loaded him with lead, an' put him out to anchor!"

"Why didn't you fetch him along as company for the lady, Danny?"

Devoe broke into a harsh, grim laugh before answering that query.

"Mebbe I'd a' tried that on, ef it hedn't bin fer thet same ledly, boss. The Daisy was born a kicker, an' he's bin gittin' more so every breath o' his life sence! Ef I'd a' tuck him in the boat, it's long odds he'd hev kicked all to glory in a heap the minnit he'd be ketched a fa'r squint at the face o' me! So—I jest sunk him!"

"You're positive that you sunk him for keeps, Danny?"

Again Devoe gave a laugh, this time so cold, so cruel, so full of vicious if satisfied revenge, that even skeptical Vaux could not well doubt his perfect sincerity as he said:

"I blowed a hole in his middle, big a-plenty fer to chuck a dog through, cap'n! I ketched him when he didn't know—when the fire out o' my gun would 'a' ett a hole through his hide ef thar hedn't bin a bullet in the cartridge! He never had time fer a kick—I drilled him so sudant an' so dead center sure!"

There was a brief silence, during which Captain Vaux stood beside the little fire, his head bent, his fingers tugging mechanically at his drooping mustaches.

Devoe was content to wait, knowing from past experience that this particular "sleeping dog" was best permitted to do his own rousing.

He silently slipped back a foot or two, without turning his back or making any unnecessary noise, but before he could pass beyond the circle of light, the chief again roused up.

"Tell me more about how you contrived to get hold of Miss Acton without a fight, Devoe. Did you learn how they managed to escape the fire? For, of course, they must have come through it, since you swore to seeing the Daisy hemmed in on all sides! And you never lie, Danny!"

"Ef I lied, boss, 'twasn't when I called him a devil, anyway," said the firebug, with a sickly grin visible despite his bandaged face. "He did go right plum' into the fire, an' you kin guess what that meint: only a devil, born an' bred, could 'a' drawed ten breaths in that furnace!"

"Devil goes, then! And you go—on with your story, Devoe."

Dark and gloomy, grim and silent now as he had been gay and feverish such a short time before, the chief of the Big Buffalo Gang listened to the recital.

Devoe, to do him justice, stuck closely to facts, seemingly content to rest his case on that basis.

He had been the first to discover that tiny beacon so rashly kindled by Dandy Darling in the softness of his heart, and though the idea had seemed fairly incredible, he had investigated on his own hook, seeing enough to send him in hot haste to the chief for further instructions.

"You said to ketch the gal, no matter what else turned up, boss, an' that was what I played fer, fu'st of all. I did ketch her, an' I done fetched her to your feet. Ef you hedn't bin so pinted on that pint, I'd 'a' done my level best fer to 've rcped the Daisy in, alive, but—Waal, as I said afore, I didn't dast to try it on, the way things was fixed," the firebug said, in conclusion.

"You did well—as well as I have any right to ex-^{spect}," slowly remarked the chief, frowning darkly for all that. "But I'd feel heap sight easier in mind if you could have even his carcass to show for itself!"

"I tried my level best fer to ketch it, boss."

"I know; you'll do that for your own satisfaction, Danny," with a touch of kindness. "Still—he's a mighty slippery sarpint, and this sudden vanishment looks powerful suspicious!"

Looks like he dropped into that hole to dodge both you and your bullets!"

"They was anyway one clean through him afore he hed time to do any dodgin', boss!"

"I hope so, be sure! And yet—that hole seems suspiciously convenient, for all, Danny!"

But Devoe doggedly stuck to his first statement; beyond the possibility of a doubt, the Daisy Detective was dead.

To prove this, he told how closely the river was guarded by his mates while he was probing through and under the drift. Even if the bigness of a human body could have escaped his touch, no man could have remained beneath the drift so many minutes, and still be alive. No! the Daisy Detective had been instantly slain, and his corpse had sunk to the bottom of the river!

Dan Devoe was repeating this assertion for the unnumbered time, when he was spared further waste of breath by the arrival of a courier with—in the estimation of the gang—truly glorious tidings.

"I thought I'd never find you, captain," he exclaimed, with a long breath of relief and fatigue, as he reined up his jaded horse and dropped to his feet by his chief. "I have to report that the so-called town of Big Buffalo no longer exists; that it was fairly wiped from existence by the fire, this evening!"

A number of the gang had drawn near the fire, their interest awakened by the return of Dan Devoe, and when they caught the words spoken by the courier, they burst into a wild, ringing cheer of fierce delight.

One of their number—a tall, lank individual, none other than the runner on the yellow mustang who had borne a message to the wounded firebugs, Dan Devoe and Billy Blue—named Joe Green, flung a hand-spring, then stood on his head almost in the edge of the fire, his heels rattling together as his long legs flourished wildly in the air, a series of crows that would have put a gamecock on its metal, shrilling from his bearded lips.

Captain Vaux caught an ankle and flung the over-enthusiastic fellow end over end, sharply crying:

"Silence, Joe Green! Upend yourself and fall to the rear, or I'll start a tune for your dancing! And the rest of you—button up!"

The gang silenced, he turned to the courier, and asked for particulars. True, he had some hours earlier received word that the fire was working his stern will with the town of Big Buffalo; but this report was to come from the lips of a trusty man whom he had dispatched for the special purpose of learning the whole truth.

The courier delivered his report, clearly but tersely. It may be even more briefly summed up. Big Buffalo was no more; the fire had made a clean sweep, so far as the tents and frail cabins were concerned.

Captain Vaux burst into a grim, fierce laugh of exultation.

"The purblind fools! They had fair warning, but, they declined to accept it as such. Now let them take the penalty instead!"

"They have taken it, captain, so far as their shelter is concerned, but how about the after-clap?" quietly asked the courier, who appeared to be far above the gang's average, so far as intelligence went.

"After-clap?" snarled the chief, showing his teeth. "We'll make it, if there is any! Who can prove that the fire wasn't purely accidental? Who can swear that the fire which wiped out their miserable town, didn't find its start in the same whirlwind that began the ruin on this side of the gulch?"

"They'll not lack tongues daring enough even for that, captain," was the cool response. "And when they point out the raid made on their temporary camp at the ruined bridge, as proof that human hands were at work, what then?"

"Let them point! Let them talk—let them say what they will, now the fight has fairly begun! Ay! and I'll never let up my blows until every dog of them has been driven out of this section! What right have they here, anyway? Our claims were first!"

"You know what they claim for their side—that we entered the country before the legal hour, or we could never have had our stakes all placed so carefully when they came in, racing for dear life!"

Captain Kay Vaux reached out a sinewy hand to grip the courier by a shoulder, bending forward and glaring almost savagely into his face as he snarled:

"Look ye, Amos Kendall! I've counted you a true man—one of my best and most trusty!—but this sort of arguing sounds mighty suspicious! Have you turned coat so soon? Have you gone over to the Boomers? Are we to fight you with them?"

"No, Captain Vaux," was the quiet response, meeting that fiery gaze without a sign of flinching. "I'm with you, soul and body. I enlisted for the war, as you'd ought to know. Still, I can look on both sides of a matter, and I warn you that the fight isn't nearly won, even yet! The Boomers have the law on their side, and they'll fight to the last gasp!"

"So much the more fun for us then!" recklessly laughed the chief, dropping his hand and turning abruptly away from the fire.

He passed into the darkness, soon catching sight of a tiny fire by which Lettice Acton was sitting, her senses restored, her dark eyes lifting apprehensively as she heard his approaching footsteps.

"Good-evening, Miss Acton. Glad to see you looking so bright!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

MALIGNING THE DEAD.

CAPTAIN VAUX doffed his hat, bowing with the supple grace of a dancing master, but Lettice shrank away from the arch-villain with a smothered cry of fright.

Only for an instant, however. Then, her memory flashing back to that dastardly deed at the drift, she managed to utter:

"Where is he? Tell me that he was—was not killed!"

"May I ask whom you mean by that pronoun, Miss Acton?" gently purred the chief, bland as milk and sweet as honey, to outward seeming.

"You must know—the one who saved my life from that terrible fire—Mr. Darling!"

"Saved your life from the flames? Possibly. But why did he save you from perishing thus, my dear child? Only the more certainly to destroy both body and soul!"

Sharply, viciously came the last sentence, but instead of stunning the maiden, that cruel charge lent her both spirit and energy. A warm flush leaped into her face, her eyes caught a glow of indignation, and springing to her feet, she cried:

"'Tis false! How dare you bring such a cruel and unjust charge against a gentleman who almost gave his life to preserve mine?"

"Because the charge is based on solid truth, Miss Acton," coldly interposed Vaux, catching an arm and, despite her feeble resistance, returning the maiden to her former position on the double blanket. "I let my honest indignation overstep the boundary line of prudence, it may be, but since I have made the accusation, I'll back it up with facts so stubborn that even your unsettled mind cannot doubt longer."

Weak, unnerved, smitten with a fresh fear, poor Lettice bowed her head, sobbing forth the name of her adopted father, of her brother.

"Your brother?" the merciless knave echoed.

"Where is that brother now, Miss Acton?"

"Safe—he told me Fred was safe!"

"Meaning the fellow who was introduced to you as Dandy Darling?" he asked. "Then, he lied to you in that, as in all else!"

"Lied? I don't understand what—what do you mean, sir?" faltered the agitated maiden.

"Fred is safe—isn't he?"

"Just as safe as he was the moment when Dandy Darling assured you of his escape from the flames—yes," slowly replied Vaux, deeming it best to soften the blow he was, nevertheless, determined to strike. "I'll tell you the whole story, after a bit. You are too deeply agitated, just at present. I beg of you, my dear child, to struggle for self-control. I hate to do it, but it's a duty I dare not postpone."

Although so intended, his words were poorly calculated to revive either hope or courage, yet they produced a result pretty much as well calculated to meet his views, by partially stunning the brain.

It should not be forgotten that Lettice Acton had suffered severely, in mind as in body, since the beginning of that ill-fated stroll away from the camp by the ruined bridge. Indeed, had she not been gifted with unusual strength of both body and brain, she could never have lived through that terrific ordeal.

Remembering all this, it will not be thought so strange that she showed but feeble resistance to this evil spirit, in what followed during the next few minutes, answering his questions mechanically yet with perfect truth, neither disputing his right to ask them, nor questioning him, in turn.

"I have promised to tell you the whole truth, Miss Acton, though I fear you will find it—as I find it myself—a sad, pitiful story, ere the end is reached," spoke Captain Vaux, now seated close by her side, one of her hands clasped unresistingly in his own palm. "You are stronger? You can bear what I have to say?"

"I am stronger, but—please take me to my friends!" faintly moaned the poor girl.

"I promise to treat you as tenderly and care for you as thoughtfully as I might for my own child—had she been spared," softly murmured the rascal, rolling his dark eyes upward in hypocritical resignation. "And having given you this solemn pledge, may I ask you a few questions concerning your past? You will not think me too presuming, Miss Acton?"

Lettice murmured something, she hardly knew what: but Captain Vaux promptly interpreted it to his own liking, and began his inquisition.

"Your parents are dead, I believe, my poor child!"

Lettice bowed assent, her tears beginning to fall more freely.

"You have my soul-felt sympathy, poor sufferer in this vale of sin and sorrow! I believe your father's given name was Maurice!"

Again Lettice murmured an assent. She was too sorely shaken, her poor brain too nearly benumbed, for her to see how clumsily the knave was trying to cover up his real purpose.

"Just so," with a bow of pleasure, his black eyes glowing. "And since that was the case, I know that the maiden name of your sainted mother was Hesperia Upthegrove."

A ray of surprise that this complete stranger should be so perfectly posted in her family affairs, crept into that dazed brain, and Letty showed her astonishment in her uplifted face. Captain Vaux smiled in bland compassion upon her, the red glow of the little fire softening the stern lines on his clear-cut visage.

"Does it sound queer to you, Miss Acton, that I should know so much concerning you and yours? Wait a little, and I'll explain: let it suffice for the present that it was through the fellow who called himself Dandy Darling, that I gathered these facts: not by conniving with him, though, I am happy to assure you!"

"He is—oh, it was cruelly done!" gasped Lettice, covering her eyes in the vain attempt to shut out that awful scene on the drift.

"Not so!" sternly cried the arch-villain. "'Twas most righteously done! It should have been done years ago! Better far for you—for your poor brother—for all your friends, indeed! Better for all who hate sin and treachery, had that demon perished long ago! For, Lettice Acton, all that they and you have suffered of late, has come upon you by the will and through the hand of that very man who—saw the mark—so heroically risked his life to rescue you from the fire! From the flames his hand set in motion, mark ye!"

"No! no! I will not believe that!" gasped Lettice, lifting her head and trying to look the indignation only held in bounds by her mental and physical exhaustion.

"You will be forced to believe it in the end, my poor child, for it is the bitter, black, shameful truth," said Vaux, speaking more evenly, but never relenting in his devilish resolution. "I'm speaking by the card, now, and am fully prepared to prove every word I pronounce.

"I tell you that long before your friends reached the borders of Oklahoma, this archrascal was plotting evil against you and yours. Do you ask why he should do this? Listen, and I'll tell you.

"Although you may still be in ignorance of the fact, you and your brother, as children of Maurice and Hesperia Acton, are in reality the heirs to an enormous fortune, which has been waiting the rightful claimants for years."

"I don't—it can't be!" faltered Lettice, bewilderedly.

"Time shall prove the truth of my every word, Miss Acton. And, in some underworld manner, this—call him Dandy Darling, if the title suits you best!—learned of the fortune, and set about hunting up the legal heirs. He found them in yourself and your brother Frederick.

"Did he, like an honest man, hasten to tell you of your good fortune, and point out how you might secure it? Well, hardly! Instead, he was determined to win the fortune for himself, and laid his plans accordingly.

"You can't have forgotten how many uncountable misfortunes have befallen your little colony of home-seekers, since striking the border of Oklahoma. Each and every one of those troubles were planned by Dandy Darling, and set in motion by his hand, or by the hands of an evil gang of criminals whom he had gathered together for the express purpose of aiding him in winning the fortune which is rightfully yours!"

He paused as though expecting question or denial, but Lettice sat as if stunned by his black charges. And pitilessly he continued:

"He knew that he could not hope to win all, without imbruting his hands in human blood; but, did he hesitate on that account? Not a bit of it! For—I swear to you that i was his hands that helped spread the cruel flames by which your poor brother was overtaken and—"

"No! no! do not say it!" moaned Lettice, shivering in her agony. "Fred is not—he could not be—"

"He went down with you into the valley of death—he has not yet come out of it, poor child!"

That blow was too terrible to bear up under, and amid her broken sobs, the poor child begged him to take her back to her friends, to Uncle Hiram.

"I'll do my level best," was his grave response, as he rose. "But, Dandy Darling and his evil gang has swept them far and wide, if indeed, his fiends spared their bare lives. Now can you weep over his just doom? No! rather thank heaven that he has perished in his sins!"

CHAPTER XXV.

DANDY DARLING AS EAVESDROPPER.

ALTHOUGH so little like each other, save in rascality, there was a curious coincidence of that night, connecting Dan Devoe with his chief, Kay Vaux.

While his mates were growling at the firebug for wasting so much time in searching for the body of Dandy Darling at the drift, Devoe argued from the standpoint that the Daisy Detec-

tive might be alive. No sooner did Captain Vaux take up that thread, than Devoe grew doggedly certain that by no possibility could his enemy have escaped certain death, while the captain searched for arguments to show that such an escape was not only possible but highly probable.

A few minutes later Vaux had stepped into the shoes of Dan Devoe, positively swearing to Lettice Acton that Dandy Darling had left this world for a lower region, vastly to the benefit of all honest mankind.

Not the least curious part of the coincidence lay in the fact that all were perfectly sincere, contradictory as the arguments of each man would sound, when both periods were brought together.

A certain wise saying—particularly familiar to men of a sporting turn of mind—bath it that “there’s nothing so uncertain as a dead sure thing!” And yet another proverb tells us that “second thoughts are wisest” or best.

The more carefully one looked at the matter, searching for arguments both for and against the possible escape of the Daisy Detective from death by the lead or by water, the more certain did it appear that he could by no means have missed death, either by shooting or by drowning, or a combination of both.

That was where second thoughts appeared to have the better of it, clinching the sure thing with a double clinch.

And, notwithstanding all this, Dandy Darling was not only alive, but alert and active, able to withstand an abundance of just such killing as Dan Devoe boasted of.

Still, his escape was little short of miraculous, and of a fashion that would hardly succeed twice in a hundred attempts, should any one be foolhardy enough to try it on more than once.

His suspicions had been awakened at the very outset, as mentioned at the time. He knew that the occupants of the skiff lied in claiming to be honest Boomers, driven from land by the fire, and he believed them to be in sympathy with, if not allies of, the firebugs, one at least of whom bore his private mark.

He did not recognize the voice of Dan Devoe, for that was greatly altered by the bandaged wound in his face. His scattering the fire to shield his own features militated against his recognizing the form of either man, and they in the boat took care to keep their faces well out of fair view.

Only for this combination of circumstances, Dandy Darling might have preferred fighting to yielding, even for Lettice Acton’s sake. But it was not until Letty betrayed herself and her intense longing to be taken from the drift by these bogus friends of Uncle Hi, that the Daisy Detective actually recognized Dan Devoe, the spokesman, as one of the firebugs whom he had interrupted at their dastardly work.

It was during the next few moments that Darling’s brain did its keenest, swiftest work. And during the first of those brief seconds, Dan Devoe and his mates were frightfully near their death, if they had but known it!

Only for Lettice, now on her feet and fully exposed to a stray shot, the detective would have shot down Devoe, and tried to cow his two comrades; with her thus, he dared not make the attempt.

In his delight at seeing complete success so near, Devoe more fully exposed his hand, and knowing that even if it had not already come, he would surely be recognized as soon as he entered the boat, Dandy Darling swiftly ran over his chances, winning time by so cautiously guarding and guiding Lettice Acton over the rough drift to the boat.

He might keep to the drift, covering himself by the protruding odds and ends and the gloom, picking off the enemy even while they were trying to do him the same favor; but that would endanger Lettice!

He might plunge into the river, diving and swimming, but there was light enough along the water to betray him to keen eyes whenever he was forced to rise for air, and if not shot, he would be overtaken by such apt oarsmen long before he could make land. That would mean death or an ignominious surrender, for the presence of Lettice in the boat would once more deny him the privilege of making any resistance.

Then—his foot came near slipping into a hole between two logs, and he instantly remembered having included that precise spot in his first thorough examination of the drift and its possibilities.

It would be taking terribly long chances, he knew, but he likewise knew that no ordinary course could save his life, since he dared not risk an open fight. And then, as he assisted Lettice into the boat, seemingly wrapped up in providing for her safe passage, Dandy Darling saw Dan Devoe quickly free one hand, to clutch a revolver.

That sight fully decided him, and though he appeared to fall at the crack of the weapon, Dandy Darling had the advantage by the merest fraction of an instant, going down through the opening between the two logs, much as though the passage had been liberally greased for that particular occasion!

Blinded by the glare from his own weapon, Devoe fired other shots, but they went wide of his mark, though the mere fact of firing them helped him to believe the death of his hated and dreaded enemy.

Dandy Darling shot through the opening, having not the slightest idea of lingering beneath the drift; even a lunatic would never have been insane enough to entertain such an idea, knowing nothing of what lay hidden there. He counted on fixing the attention of his enemies upon that particular point long enough to permit him, by deep diving and vigorous swimming, to get far enough from the drift to allow his breaking surface sufficiently to obtain an occasional breath of air, without being discovered and chased.

Possibly he might have succeeded in this, only for his being caught by a point of stout wood, by a fold of his strong flannel shirt at the back between the shoulders, just where neither hand could reach it, let him struggle never so furiously!

The current swept his body and feet along until he lay parallel with its flow. And just as he began his fierce struggle to break away, Dandy Darling made a truly marvelous discovery.

His head was partially above water, and he could breathe with perfect freedom!

He had hardly time to fully realize this fact, and to see as well that a log curved above his face, when the jar of the skiff striking the edge of the drift not far from his side, warned him to take his chances of escaping search, rather than attract notice by trying to set himself free.

The next ten minutes or more were full of suspense to the helpless detective, who could hear every movement made by Dan Devoe, and catch the majority of words spoken; but, as already recorded, Devoe was finally choked off, without having found his game.

Waiting until fully satisfied that the skiff had pulled away from the drift, Dandy Darling secured a hold with both hands on the drift above him, drawing or forcing himself up against the current a few inches, then shaking his body until his shirt broke away from the snag. Filling his lungs, forcing his feet and legs far downward, making sure there was nothing below to intercept him, Dandy Darling changed his grip so he could give himself a vigorous push toward the bottom of the river, then turned in the water, diving deeper and swimming with all his vigor until he felt positive he was far below the drift.

Rising to the surface, safe and sound, the detective swept his gaze around, almost instantly locating the enemy, now pulling briskly for the opposite shore.

“I reckoned as much, but nothing like making dead sure!” he mentally said, keeping his head low and swimming with the breast-stroke as least likely to attract the notice of his enemies, in case they should be watching the dimly-lighted surface behind them. “Maybe I’ll be in at the death, after all, my sweet-scented rascals!”

Dandy Darling struck out more powerfully as the current carried him lower, and the men in the boat passed out of his sight; for it was possible that the kidnappers might not pause long when once ashore, and he had already sworn to rescue the maiden from their evil hands before harm could come to her.

Landing some little distance below where the boat was left, guarding against the possible presence of dangerous quicksands by never permitting his feet to touch bottom until his hands were firmly fastened on a dangling root, the Daisy Detective crept up to the level; and only pausing to squeeze the superfluous water from his garments, and to empty his boots lest the sound of dripping proves dangerous, he stole silently up the shore, using both eyes and ears.

He caught sight of the little fire, just before Captain Vaux broke off questioning Dan Devoe, bearing enough, however, to give him a fair idea how matters stood, smiling grimly at being so doggedly pronounced a dead man!

He tried to learn what had called Captain Vaux away, by creeping around the fire to strike his trail, but only to be foiled. The members of the Big Buffalo Gang barred his way in that direction, and he was forced to abandon the idea for the time being.

In point of fact, Dandy Darling soon found that he would have to retreat still further, or run too many chances of being discovered by some of the rascals stumbling over him in their erratic movements.

Having at length found a covert which seemed sufficient to insure him against discovery by accident, Dandy Darling set about making mental notes for future use, trying to sum up the full strength of the enemy; but before he made much progress, the courier, bringing word of the destruction of Big Buffalo, brought all the company to the front.

Dandy Darling listened with breathless interest, as may be supposed, yet without forgetting his main purpose: where was Lettice Acton? If he might only find her, could he not carry her off unseen and unheard during that excitement?

He left his covert, and managed to partly circle around the gathering, only to be once

more foiled, though Captain Vaux guided him to the very person he was seeking.

Dandy Darling caught a goodly portion of the words spoken by the chief of the Big Buffalo Gang, but he lay low, making no sign. The odds were far too heavy for any one man to do battle successfully against, and though he could easily enough slay this lying villain, and even carry Lettice off, he could not hope to win free. He would be heard, chased, overtaken; then Lettice would be friendless indeed!

Hoping that the fair captive would be left alone long enough for him to assure her of protection if he could not steal away with her to the boat, Dandy Darling watched and waited; but in vain.

Captain Vaux called Joe Green, bidding horses prepared and brought to that spot, for himself and the lady. He watched long enough to be sure no opening such as he hoped for would be offered, then silently backed away, both to avoid probable discovery should more of the gang draw near, and to make what other points were possible.

In doing this, he narrowly escaped being stumbled over by none other than Dan Devoe, escaping simply because the progress of that worthy was just then checked by a comrade hailing him, with:

“Want any help with Billy, Dan?”

“I don’t reckon,” was the gruff response. “He’s bed heap sight more joggin’ now than’s good fer his hurts, an’ the boss kin git ‘long ‘thout two cripples jest as well as he kin ‘thout one!”

“Then you’re goin’ to stop behind the rest?”

“I’m gwine to do jest as I dug-gun please, ye want to know!” growled the firebug, turning to resume his progress.

But the delay had given Dandy Darling ample time in which to make his retreat good, without losing one word of that brief interchange of sentences.

“See you later, Danny,” he softly breathed, watching the firebug and marking his course for future reference. “You seemed dreadfully put out at not finding me over yonder at the drift; wonder if you wouldn’t fairly die of pure joy if I should make you a call, shortly?”

CHAPTER XXVI.

DANDY DARLING AS THIEF-TAKER.

WAITING until Dan Devoe passed out of sight and hearing, Dandy Darling turned his attention to watching the gang proper, with much more ease of mind than he would have experienced only for his last discovery.

He saw Captain Vaux on horseback, and gritted his teeth savagely as he saw Lettice, seemingly unconscious, either under the influence of some powerful drug, or else completely broken down by the terrible shock administered by that glibly living villain, handed up to his arms by one of the gang.

He saw the chief ride away, followed after a straggling fashion by his men.

It was a powerful temptation the detective was called upon to resist, during those few minutes, but he nerved himself and won the victory. It was very hard to lie idle and see the maiden whom—he no longer sought to deceive himself on that score—he was fast learning to love so passionately, carried away a helpless captive in such thoroughly vile arms!

Waiting until fairly assured that the gang had all departed with the exception of Devoe and his chum, Dandy Darling stole forth from his covert and noiselessly did a bit of scouting, to make certain he would not have still others to deal with in carrying out the bold scheme already shaped in his fertile brain.

His belief proved true; the gang had all followed in the wake of their leader.

This point settled to his satisfaction, Dandy Darling turned his thoughts toward Devoe and Blue. Should he try to discover their present whereabouts by cautious scouting, or should he take the boldest course: that of pretending to be one of the gang, returning with a message from the boss?

Both had their disadvantages, but Dan Devoe was a suspicious knave, and should he catch a hint of that spying, he might prove himself an awkward customer to handle in the dark.

That belief decided the detective, and pausing only long enough to recall the name of the courier from Big Buffalo, and to freshen his remembrance of that voice, Dandy Darling took a few hasty steps through the weeds, then called aloud:

“Dan—I say, Dan Devoe!”

“What ye want yelpin’ out that-a-way?” came an angry but clearly not suspicious voice in reply from some little distance.

“I want you! The boss sent me back to Curse the dark!” breaking off with a trip and a flounder among the briars. “Where are you, anyway, man?”

“Inside o’ my rags—whar else? Who’re you, anyway?”

“Kendall—Amos Kendall, of course!” in seeming disgust. “Come over this way before I twist my legs clean off, or I’ll go back and report that I couldn’t even begin to find you!”

“What’s up? Who sent ye?” demanded Devoe, sulkily, yet plainly nibbling at the bait, for his tones grew clearer, and when Dandy Darling

ceased his own floundering, he could catch the sound of approaching footsteps.

"The boss sent me to tell you—devil fly away with the holes, anyway!" stumbling again. "That smoke's made me blind as a mole, and if you want to bear the message, blamed if you haven't got to come the rest of the way—that's flat, Daniel Devoe!"

"Waal, haln't I comin', dug-gun ye?" snarled the irritated firebug, completely deceived.

"So's Christmas! More fool me for leaving my nag over yonder! If I ever get back to it without breaking my blessed neck, I'll tie myself fast to the saddle—sure!"

"Bit cranky, hain't ye, man?" growled Devoe, drawing nearer, peering through the gloom that reigned beneath the trees. "They's somethin' more o' ye then a empty voice, I reckon, but—Oh, thar ye be, eh?"

"Yes, hero I be, and—*there you are!*"

Striking swift and sure with clubbed revolver, Dandy Darling felled his enemy to the ground, so completely stunning him that not even a groan escaped his lips. But the detective was running no unnecessary risks, just then, and almost before Devoe could fall, a brace of muscular hands were gripped tightly about his throat, to make all sure.

With his work so neatly begun, Dandy Darling found the rest easy enough; and once fully convinced that Devoe was really senseless, not counterfeiting, it was the task of but a few moments to cut strips from the clothes of the firebug long enough and strong enough to bind his limbs and fasten a snug gag between his jaws.

Swiftly as he worked at this, Dandy Darling had little leeway, for though he had not measured the force of his blow, Devoe had a tough knot for a head, and as his senses began to come back, he began to struggle with all his gathering powers.

"I say, Danny!" came a hoarse call from out the darkness, apparently issuing from the same spot where Devoe must have stood when first responding to the counterfeit Kendall.

"Say it fer me, Billy!" promptly answered Darling, but using the tones of the firebug instead of his own.

"What's the racket out yender?"

"Jest a word from the boss; wants to see me fer a bit. You wait. I'll be back in a couple o' shakes—don't ye skeer!"

"But—if the boss keeps ye, Danny?"

"He cain't keep me! But—if he should—I'll send ye Joe Green to keep ye comp'ny. So-long, Billy! Don't git onpatient, now!"

Without pausing for more, Dandy Darling picked up the firebug and swung him across one shoulder, gripping his legs firmly to keep them from doing too much wild kicking, then made the best of his way to the river-bank, where the skiff had been left, fastened securely.

Dumping his captive on the ground, where the moonlight fell upon them both, Dandy Darling gave Devoe a chance to fairly recognize his captor, then said, with a grim remembrance of the words howled at him by the firebug on the drift:

"Satan sent me back after his right bower, and I picked out you, Dan Devoe! And as I'm acquainted with only one road to the infernal regions, I'm going to ship you back by that route. You can't well raise any objections, since you chose it for me, dear Danny!"

Without further delay, the Daisy Detective hauled Devoe down the bank and dumped him into the skiff. Then, releasing the light vessel and slipping the rude oars, he began pulling out across the river.

The clouds had nearly all vanished by this time, and with the moon shining so brightly, it was no difficult matter to locate the drift.

Pointing the bow diagonally up and across, Dandy Darling found it an easy matter to keep a little above a direct line to the drift, and in a short time he ranged alongside the friendly log to which his enemies had anchored earlier in the night.

Holding fast to this with one hand, it was an easy matter to creep along to the bow and fasten the skiff securely by means of the wet rope answering for a painter.

Shifting Devoe so that he was in a handy position, Darling stepped upon the drift, and quickly dragged the firebug after him.

Yielding to a touch of malice hardly to be reproved in one who had himself been so foully dealt with, Dandy Darling shifted his grip on the rascal, turning his head downward and holding him for a brief space over the very hole through which he had dropped.

"Say your prayers, Danny, if that part of your education has not been too sadly neglected!" he said, with a low but ferocious laugh. "I had to take the trip, and you've got to try it on, too! Pray! When I count ten—good-bye!"

Slowly, distinctly the numerals came, and with the last one, Darling actually plunged Devoe into the opening until the cool water rose to his neck!

The helpless rascal struggled desperately, vain though that was, until Dandy Darling, feeling a vast deal better for having in a slight measure paid back the debt he owed, lifted the knave out of the water and carried him over to a smaller

log lying near the huge one on which that unlucky fire had been kindled.

Dumping him down here, Darling squatted by his side, removing the gag from place in order to grant him the free use of his vocal organs.

"I happened to think, just in time to cheat the devil of his dues for a few minutes, Danny, that maybe I could learn a little something from your sweet lips."

"Ye devil!" huskily panted Devoe, writhing like a wounded snake in a desperate effort to burst his bonds. "Never a word'll ye git out o' me but cusses!"

"Not even to save your life, Daniel? If I swear to turn you free, safe in wind and limb, won't you tell me where your boss took that young lady?" slowly asked the detective.

"Cuss ye—no I won't!" snarled the firebug, in impotent fury.

Darling bent lower, gazing keenly into those flaming eyes for a few moments in silence. He saw enough there to warn him that his hopes of gleaned information from that quarter were worse than vain, and with a short, hard laugh he set about replacing the gag.

"All right, Daniel Devoe! You've had your chance, but you flung it over your shoulder! Now—tell the devil I sent ye fer comp'ny!"

CHAPTER XXVII.

DANDY DARLING AS INQUISITOR.

ONCE more the Daisy quoted from the firebug, and his sole auditor could not have obtained much consolation from either tones or expression as the detective crouched there by his side.

Still, no blow was actually dealt, though Dandy Darling found it no slight temptation, recalling so vividly his feelings when his downward plunge through the drift was arrested by the catching of his shirt.

Up to this time he had not taken the trouble to disarm Devoe, about whose middle was buckled a stout leather belt. Removing this, Darling gave the revolvers a passing glance before tossing them into the river, then made use of the knife to slit the belt into strong but pliable thongs, with which he lost little time in binding Dan Devoe to the log already selected for that purpose, first placing him flat on his stomach.

"If you was engineering the job, and I was the victim, you'd turn me other side upward, no doubt," coolly observed the Daisy, while making his work sure. "It might be a bit more interesting, particularly if the sun comes out good and hot on the morrow, to say nothing of the next day, or the next, and so on through a week or two! But—flies are mighty apt to go for carrion, they say, and I'll give you at least a chance to cheat them."

By this time his task was completed, so far as securing Devoe to the log. He tested each knot thoroughly, and when the last was tied he felt confident that the firebug could not possibly escape without assistance.

"Chuckling internally, and calling me a dandy old chump for letting you down so easy, aren't ye, Danny?" asked Darling, with a low, metallic laugh as he drew back a bit. "It does look like an entire comfortable of pure kindness, that's a fact, especially after the manner in which you went for me whenever you had a chance. But—did you ever stop to figure out how long a man of your general toughness could live without food, or drink, or motion, Danny?"

Leaving his prisoner to digest this query for a little, Darling moved several pieces of the loose drift, shaping a seemingly careless blind on the one exposed side of the firebug, rendering it impossible for any one to see him from the river or either bank, yet doing nothing that could lessen his punishment impending, leaving him fully exposed to the rays of the sun when day should return.

Having completed this part of his work, Dandy Darling could not refrain from giving his enemy one more thrust, as part payment for his past sins.

"I'm going to leave you, Danny, and if you're at all in love with life, the wisest thing you can do is to keep up a mighty wishing for complete success to bear me company in all my schemes. For—I'm the only one who knows where you have gone into retirement, Danny! I'm the only man who ever will know, and if I should happen to be cut off in my prime by any of your friends, Danny, just think! Who'd come to set you at liberty?"

"No one—unless you can call up the Old Boy!"

Dandy Darling said his say, then abandoned the drift for the skiff, releasing the rope and pulling for the shore.

He felt considerably better, after his parting words. True, it could hardly be called chivalrous, and in the time to come he might grow ashamed of having so ingeniously tortured a helpless prisoner; but it was too soon after his own hard experience by fire and water, both owing mainly to this very rascal, for him to feel remorse or pity.

The Daisy made quick time back to the shore from which he had borne Dan Devoe, landing and securing the boat to the same spot.

"I wasted more time than I calculated on,"

he muttered, with a frown, as he noted the position of the moon. "What if Billy Blue has grown suspicious enough to make himself scarce?"

It was a far from comforting thought, for he had risked almost every hope, every chance, on the cast of this die. He had been given but scant time in which to make his decision, but he believed then, as he tried to believe now, that he was acting for the best interests of Lettice Acton in refraining from following her captors at once.

He could only have kept them in sight or hearing, by greatly endangering himself, and discovery while playing the spy on the Big Buffalo Gang, would mean almost certain death.

"No, I was right, and time shall prove it!" he mentally repeated, turning away from the shore and making his way toward the point from whence he had toled Dan Devoe so adroitly. "If this knave has skipped out, I'll still have Devoe to squeeze. He's a tough knot, but I can get all the necessary light out of him—if I have to!"

Even as he shaped the thought, Darling knew it was anything but a dead sure thing. Devoe might break, but he would never gratify an enemy whom he hated so intensely as he hated the Daisy, by bending.

Darling used plenty of caution until he found the spot where he captured the firebug. Then, carefully noting the direction from whence had come the whining call of Billy Blue, and estimating the distance to the best of his ability, he advanced, taking no heed of his steps, so far as noise was concerned.

His pulse was beating a trifle quicker than was its custom, but the excuse was quickly removed. Evidently his fears were without foundation in fact, for a husky, whining voice came from no great distance ahead, though nothing could be seen just yet, thanks to the interlaced boughs of the trees.

"Is that you, Danny?"

"Who else, Billy?" promptly replied Darling, perfectly counterfeiting the muffled, indistinct tones of the firebug. "Wasn't gittin' uneasy, was ye, pard?"

"I'd like to know ef I wasn't, jest!" with peeved anger mingling with his evident relief.

"Waal, didn't I tell ye I'd come back!" mumbled the counterfeit firebug, guided in his advance by those calls.

"Yes, but—'twouldn't be the fu'st lie I done ketched ye in, an' that's what I'm tellin' ye, Dan Devoe!"

By this time Dandy Darling could just begin to distinguish a rude shelter formed of sticks and slabs of bark from a huge cottonwood tree, out of which came a feeble glow as of a camp-fire.

This guided him the rest of the way, and slouching his hat, a trophy from Devoe, he prepared for another capture.

"Feelin' any livelier, Billy?" he hoarsely croaked, needing an answer to fully assure him as to the exact location of the firebug.

"Feelin' so mighty nigh all gone they hain't no fun in it! An' speakin' o' gone—ef you'd a' bin a couple o' shakes longer, I'd a' bin gone in dead airnest, Dan! I reckoned the boss'd pulled ye off fer good, an' I was jest fixin' to light out fer the Den on my own hook, when—I say!" his whining tones changing to an echo of stupid surprise, as that slouching figure came inside the rude shelter. "What hev ye done with yer rags on?"

Knowing that discovery must surely follow, dim though the light was, the detective sprang upon the wounded firebug, throwing him back on the ground, both hands closing about his throat, both legs winding about his lower limbs, the surprise going far toward insuring victory.

At any time Billy Blue would have furnished a poor match for the Daisy, though so much his superior in mere weight and length, but reduced by loss of blood and nerve, he fell an easy prey.

Satisfied that he would find him little better than a plaything as soon as he closed, Darling did not hesitate to set one hand free from his hairy throat to tear away the weapons at his middle. Then, making little of Blue's struggles, he secured both arms with thongs prepared for that particular purpose.

"Don't—don't butcher me!" gasped the firebug, shivering with abject terror, as Darling drew a knife, the faint glow of the little mass of coals reflecting from its polished surface.

"I'll not—just this instant, Billy," coolly replied the Daisy, using his tool to cut other strips from the firebug's clothing, with which he quickly completed the binding process.

Taking a look at the wound in his breast, replacing the bandages where they seemed to be loosened a bit by that brief struggle, Dandy Darling placed his captive in a fairly comfortable position with his back against the cottonwood tree, against which that rude shelter had been built.

Not until that moment did Billy Blue recognize his captor.

"The Daisy—an' I reckoned ye was—Danny!"

Despite himself, Darling could not help laughing a bit, so ludicrous was the dismay, so complete the fear, written on that ugly face. Very different metal here from what he had found in Devoe, thank fortune!

"Just what I was playing for, Billy," he said, coolly doubling up his legs for a seat in front of the shivering firebug. "Dan had other important business, and so I reckoned you'd be lonesome if left much longer in your own company, so—see?"

"You—you didn't kill him?" faltered Blue.

Darling frowned in place of smiling. Though Billy Blue had not recovered from that terrible surprise, the very fact of his being put in bonds, to say nothing of that humane mistake the detective had made in readjusting the bandages over his hurt, had assured him that he was in no great danger of death; and with that assurance his usual nerve was coming back to him.

"Don't you begin counting your chickens, Billy," he said, grimly, a glitter in his dark eyes that caused the firebug to flinch visibly. "I haven't butchered you yet, but how long I'll hold my hand back, depends very much on your own tongue. If it talks to order, and don't clog up with too many lies, I may conclude to let you live until the law chips in."

"What hev I done fer to—"

"Button up, until I give you leave to chin! I've got Dan Devoe in limbo. I called him out—you heard me—by pretending to be a messenger from the boss. I've pinched him until he's squealed. I am fairly sure he told a straight story, too, but there's heap sight too much at stake for a fellow of my caliber to take any wide chances. So—I came back here to have a bit of a chat with you, Billy!"

"Just a bit longer, please!" lifting a warning finger. "I'm going to ask you much the same questions I put to Dan. I'm going to see how near your answers match each other. If they fay, all right. If not—well, you are right under my thumb, Billy Blue, while Dan is quite a little distance away. Can you cipher out what that means, Billy Blue?"

"I don't—fore the Lawd, boss, I hain't done nothin'!"

"Not as much as I intend giving you a chance to do, that's a fact. Now—begin! Make a clean breast of it, or you're a dead dog!"

"I don't know what ye tryin' to git through ye!" desperately muttered the firebug, his eyes drooping, but with a sullen expression coming into his face that boded trouble ahead.

"You ought to know, Billy, but I'll give you one more chance to redeem yourself. There's a gang of you fellows bucking against the Big Buffalo colony. You broke down the bridge over yonder, and penned them up in the bottoms. You spread the fire—bah! breaking off with an air of impatience. "What's the use? I caught you and Dan doing your share of the work, as that hole though your evil carcass proves.

"Now, you are one of that gang. I can prove enough against you to send you higher than a kite, in company with Dan Devoe. You know that much. You know that your life is justly forfeited, but—there is one manner in which you can ransom yourself."

"What way is that?"

"By making a full and complete confession. By selling your mates and all their secrets, to buy yourself. Right there you have it in a single mouthful, Billy Blue! Which will you do: swallow it like a little man, or spit it out and go up a tree?"

Dandy Darling turned his head swiftly at a sound, but it was only a horse hitched hard by, clearing its nostrils.

"How kin I know you'll play me white, ef I do squeal?"

"You'll have to take that for granted, Billy. Make your choice: a rope, or your life! I have no more time to waste in chin-music, and I'm not caring particularly which horn of the dilemma you select, either!"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

DANDY DARLING AS EXECUTIONER.

THE Daisy broke off with an admirably counterfeited yawn, then once more fixing those keenly glowing eyes on the sullen face of his prisoner, he added:

"And, do you know, Billy, I'd just a little rather you'd hold out stubborn to the end. I've never actually hung a man, with my own hands, though I've often wondered how it would make a fellow feel—the fellow who had hold of the right end, of course!"

Where fierce threats might have failed, this bit of cool cynicism had the desired effect, and the prisoner wilted, shivering violently, his words hardly articulate as he begged for mercy, promising to do or say anything demanded, just so his life might be spared.

"Do you mean it for an honest fact, Bill?"

"Ef Dan's blowed, whar's the use in my bangin' my own self? Yes, I mean it! Jest let me know what ye want, an' I'll do it!" desperately returned the firebug.

"All right. I said I'd give you a chance, and I never go back on my word. Just begin at the beginning, and tell me all about your outfit, Billy. But—don't forget that I've had one story from Dan, and you'll be the prime sufferer if your two accounts fail to fit in."

"But—cuss it all!" whined Blue, writhing as though on a nest of nettles. "Dan was borned

alyin', an' he couldn't tell the truth ef he was dyin'!"

"He wasn't so very far from that point, Billy, and as I took care to let him see I was pretty well posted on facts before I let him cut loose, I'm pretty sure he broke his record for once."

"What did ye tell him, boss?" whined the firebug. "Ain't I as good a right as him? Ain't I to hev even a hint, sence you give him one? I'll show up his lies, ef ye'll only—"

"Time's flying, Billy, and I've got just so many minutes to waste on you. If you haven't paid your full ransom by the time I get through this little job, up a tree you go, and the rest of the truth may ooze out of your toes—for it surely can't leak out through your lips!"

While speaking, Dandy Darling freshened up the fire a bit, then took out his knife once more, carefully whetting it to a keen edge by drawing it up and down a damp bootleg.

The prisoner gave a muffled howl of terror at this, but the Daisy paid him no further attention, gently humming a tune as he whetted his gleaming blade.

"Whar shell I begin, boss?" quavered Blue, at length.

"At the right end, of course. What sort of an outfit was it I saw over yonder, an hour or so ago! Who are they? Who is your chief? Where do they hang out when at home? How do they make their living? In one word—*everything*, Billy!"

With this as a guide and starter, the firebug began to talk, seeming to gain confidence as he proceeded, until his tongue was running with a glib freedom in strong contrast with his former falterings.

He was watching Darling closely, as only a man can watch who feels that his life hangs on a correct interpretation of that face. And, although that face remained a perfect blank, so far as betraying any unusual emotion was concerned, possibly that very fact helped convince the rascal that he was following the right trail.

Surely, if he suspected a lie, he would show some signs of irritation or anger?

As for the gang to which Dandy Darling had alluded, that was simply a body of honest men, banded together and sworn to defend each other's legal rights. They were Boomers, who had waited until the appointed hour for entering Oklahoma, and thanks to their perfect arrangements and superior stock, they had been first to plant their stakes on the stretch of ground afterward "jumped" by the colony named by Darling.

If they had finally turned to harsh measures, it had been because they were driven thereto, in order to hold their own and protect their legal rights.

It was true that he and Dan Devoe had been caught setting, or helping to spread a fire already started by the whirlwind; but they had no evil intentions in so doing. They knew nothing of people being exposed to danger. The colony could not be injured by what they did, since the strong wind was blowing directly away from the spot where they were located.

"And the beat of the fire set your cartridges to exploding, just as I chanced by, of course?" drawled the Daisy.

"That was 'long o' Dan," mumbled Blue, his eyes drooping. "He said you was campin' on his trail, 'long of a old grudge, an'—waal, sence he was my pard, what could I do but help him out the best I knewow?"

"The stake is your own, Billy, and it's you to tell the story. I'm pretty sure you haven't come to the interesting part, but maybe you'll reach it in time. Go on. Don't mind me. My hair's too long, and I'm going to play barber a bit, while listening."

Having sharpened his knife sufficiently to suit his ideas, Dandy Darling took a circular, folding mirror from his breast, pinning it on one elevated knee, then began cropping his long ringlets with a merciless hand.

Though he felt a little less confident that he was steering clear of the rope, Billy Blue resumed his "confession." There is no need to follow his argument, since nearly all he said was invented for the occasion.

Having cropped his hair short, without much care as to evenness, Dandy Darling turned to another self-imposed duty, none the less odd.

He removed his outer shirt, then cut a wide strip from the back part of his undershirt, also of flannel, but lighter in weight and in color than his outer garment. With this, after soiling it with dirt, he proceeded to bandage his face!

In his interest at this curious proceeding, Billy Blue ceased his rambling talk, staring open-eyed at that transformation.

In fact, it seemed little less, for by the time the bandage was fairly adjusted, he could almost have taken oath it was Dan Devoe in person confronting him, in place of the Daisy Detective!

"Good Lawd! he ejaculated, as something of the truth began to dawn upon him. "You low to play Dan onto somebody!"

"I've already played Dan on you, Billy,"

quietly said the Daisy. "But that don't need further explanation. When are you going to get down to sober facts? I've let you grind out lies this far, hoping you'd run out of material, but now—talk straight, you villain!"

"I ain't said a word o' lie, so help me—"

"Steady!" interposed Darling, his right hand going out and sweeping that gleaming blade swiftly before the rascal's face, with so true an aim that the keen point just pricked his lips in passing. "You haven't spoken a single word of truth up to date. Now—what is the name of your leader?"

"We jest call him boss," whined the cowed wretch.

"Each lie brings the rope an inch closer, you fool! His name is Kay Vaux. Now—is there a man in the gang called Baird Impleton?"

"Not that I ever heard say—an' that's gospel, boss!"

"Let me do the commenting, if you please; you'll find plenty of work for your tongue in giving truthful answers to my questions. And, for another shot: who is there among the colony headed by Hiram Powell, belonging to your outfit? Who keeps you posted as to their plans? In one word, who is your spy in that camp?"

"Ef they is one, I never knowed it," whined Blue. "Cross my heart ef I ain't tellin' the clean truth, so fur's I know how, boss!"

"Well put in!" grimly laughed the Daisy. "Pity your teachers in early days didn't give you a little more light on the straight and narrow way! But never mind; it's you that will have to pay the piper, and I'm perfectly willing you should set the tune for dancing by."

"Where does your outfit hang out, when they're at home?"

"They ain't no stiddy stoppin' place. Jest as it comes handy. Ye know they was driv' off o' thar claims by the other outfit."

"Never mind what I know. I'm trying to find out what you know. So far I've met with mighty poor pay, which fact is apt to make you heap sight more sorry than it will me. Go on with your gospel, Billy, but don't forget that your grace and my patience both are growing short."

The firebug seemed thoroughly cowed, at last, and mumbled forth a curious jumble of facts and lies, to which Dandy Darling listened without word or sign for some little time. But then he sprung to his feet and left the rude shelter, passing over to where the two horses belonging to the firebugs were situated.

In fear and trembling Billy Blue waited, giving a low gasp of terror as the Daisy came back, lariat in hand, shaping a noose with the aid of the iron ring in one end of the rope.

"What—you don't dast—Take it off!" howled Blue, as Darling deftly lassoed him.

"Too late, you fool! I gave you your chance, and you threw it over your shoulder. Now—I swore to hang you, and I mean to keep my word to the very letter!" sternly said Darling, tightening the noose.

"Don't—mercy! Spare my life—I'll tell ye all I know!"

CHAPTER XXIX. HONOR AMONG ROGUES.

OF that night ride, supported by the arms of the chief of the Big Buffalo Gang, Lettice Acton knew little at the time, and could recall but little more when her senses were fully restored.

She had no idea how long the journey lasted, toward which quarter of the compass they had headed, where the final halt took place, or anything more about the locality in which she found herself when that numbing shock passed away, than her own eyes could tell her.

That was but little, for though a light was burning, something above the level of her own head as she stood erect, its feeble rays did not serve to more than just make the surrounding gloom visible.

Still, the candle showed her that she was in some sort of rock chamber, and in all probability under ground; but whether or no this was the work of nature, or the result of human labor, she could only guess.

No doubt an examination of the walls, with the aid of the candle, would have solved those doubts, but before Lettice could even think of such a procedure, the chance was taken from her, by the entrance of Captain Kay Vaux.

"Hope I'm not intruding, Miss Acton?" he said, in his blandest tone of voice, doffing his hat and bowing as though his joints had been freshly oiled for the occasion.

Lettice started back as far as the rock wall would permit, her pale face growing paler, a low cry of mingled indignation and fright breaking from her lips.

Something of those strange mists rolled away at the sound of that voice and the sight of that face. She began to recall where she had last seen the one and heard the other.

"Am I to take this emotion as a welcome or a repulse, my dear?" asked Vaux, coming a little nearer, with a smile that said he cared very little what her answer might be.

"Back! don't dare to touch me!" panted Lettice, with a passionate gesture. "Why have you brought me here? Why have you so shamefully

lied to me? Why have you not kept your promise to restore me to my friends?"

The bland smile vanished from that dark face, and those darker eyes caught a glow of mingled anger and chagrin. This was more of memory than he had expected to be greeted with at the outset, and for a brief space he hardly knew what course to follow.

Captain Vaux had been doing considerable hard thinking since the Den was reached with his fair captive. He had often enough heard of the old adage treating of honor and thieves, but when he saw his own interests lying on the other side, this was a barrier readily overleaped.

"Going back on" a partner in evil gave him precious little trouble. The main question was: could he make it pay?

That was a point Kay Vaux had failed to fully decide, and when he first entered the presence of his fair prisoner, his mind was "on the fence," merely requiring a touch to send it to one side or the other.

That impulse was lent by Lettice Acton as she shrank from the chief, a flush of fear, anger, reproach and pleading all blending together, covering over the ravages worked by the fire and fatigue of the past day. To his eyes, no living woman had ever been one-half so beautiful, one-tenth so enticing, one thousandth part so worthy of being won and worn by a man of just his description!

With a swift stride forward, he caught that forbidding hand in his own, checking her start back with his other arm about her waist. For an instant he seemed about to complete the outrage by pressing his lips to hers, but that last indignity he spared her.

Lettice struggled to free herself, but vainly, until Kay Vaux laughingly gave her her freedom of his own accord, saying:

"Simply to prove to you, my dear, that my will must be yours, before yours can be mine! In other words: give me my way at the start, and you can hold the reins and crack the whip from the first quarter clear through to the home-stretch!"

That rough treatment served to strengthen rather than crush the captive. It warned her that she had an unscrupulous rascal to fight against, and reminded her that she was alone her defender.

"You are an enemy, then, instead of a friend you claimed?" she exclaimed, all trembling at an end as she drew her lithe figure erect. "I more than suspected as much, from the first. How could I help it, when you were on friendly terms with the cowardly curs who murdered an honest gentleman whose only crime was an attempt to foil their dastardly schemes?"

"Meaning the Daisy Detective?"

"Meaning Mr. Darling, the gentleman you so shamefully maligned to me! He was not there to defend himself. If he had been, you would never have dared to utter such bitter black lies!"

Instead of growing angry at such plain language, as one would naturally expect Kay, Vaux actually laughed, rubbing his hands together and gazing upon Lettice as a man might who finds himself in unexpected possession of a rare and costly treasure.

"Well, well! you talk as though you really meant it, my dear!"

"I do mean it! Every word, and a thousand fold more!"

"Then, of course, you decline to believe all I told you to the discredit of Mr. Darling, last night?"

"In still plainer words—you lied!"

Captain Vaux burst into a laugh, light and airy, his face that of a man who feels complimented rather than the reverse.

Lettice began to make a mistake very common, as she looked almost contemptuously upon her captor. Just when he was the most dangerous, she began to think him more fool than knave. If he could laugh at such bitter language, surely he would not dare to actually resist her when she sternly demanded her release?

"Now, my pretty posy," suddenly said the villain, his face and manner changing as by magic, a lean forefinger shaking before her face as his glittering eyes read her thoughts without trouble. "Don't you play the fool as well as virago! I've let you touch the limit, because there's nothing I like better in a girl than a spice of the devil. But if you ever try to cross that limit you'll have to pay the full penalty. Understand?"

Lettice turned pale again, and her figure lost something of its proud erectness. She did not understand all, but she began to realize that this was not the man she had imagined during those few minutes.

"That's right, little woman," nodded Vaux, with a short, hard laugh. "A word to the wise; and you're not nearly such a fool as you tried to make out, just now."

"What do you mean, sir?"

"To prove myself your friend, if you'll permit me to do so; to show myself your master, if you insist on having it that way. I'd enough sight rather feed you on kisses and sugar-plums, but I can administer bites and bitters, if I have to. Will you make a choice, sweetness?"

Lettice bowed her head, trying to check her

sobs and hide the tears of returning despair, but in vain. And, feeling this, she brokenly begged for mercy, for freedom to return to her sorrowing friends.

"If I take you back to them, what will be my reward?" slowly asked the villain.

"Anything you ask—anything in reason!"

"That's the point! What do you call reason? Never mind—let me clear up a few points before you attempt to define your idea of that word. Will you listen to me patiently, Miss Acton?"

"You have the power, at present. I can only submit. But beware how you abuse that power, sir!" lifting her head with a flash of returning spirit. "I am not utterly without friends, and if harm comes to me through you or yours, there will be a bitter reckoning called for!"

"Just so; now we'll get down to business, Miss Acton," with a cold bow. "You said I lied to you, last night. Well, I admit as much. It was part of the contract, and I never go back on a bargain—unless I can make greater profit by selling a partner than an adversary!"

"I lied in telling you that the Daisy Detective was Baird Impleton, but every hint I turned toward the counterfeit, really fits the original Jacobs.

"There is such a person, though you may not know or recognize him by that name, and to Baird Impleton you owe all the trouble which has come upon you—and upon your friends—of late."

"It was through the will of Baird Impleton that the bridge over the gulch was tampered with, weakening its timbers so greatly that the first team to venture upon it would surely bring about a total wreck. Why? Well, partly to prevent the Boomers from reaching their town in time to help fight for it, but mainly in order to have a better chance to get you wholly into his possession."

"I do not—I can not believe you!" panted Lettice, though a hand of ice seemed slowly closing about her heart.

"Which goes to show you can't always recognize truth when you see it," laughed the villain. "For I'm feeding you unadulterated truth by the tablespoonful, my dear! I've sworn off on lying, for the present, as I trust you'll recognize before I come to the end."

"How came I so well posted? Simply because Impleton put a hand deep enough down in his pocket to enlist me in his cause—noble or ignoble, just as you may see fit to view it. Enough that he wanted help, and I was willing to promise it—for a consideration!"

"Then—I believe you are that villain! I believe you are the man you call Baird Impleton!" impulsively cried Lettice, feeling as though some inward power was sweeping away those perplexing mists and laying the startling truths bare to her brain.

Captain Vaux stared at her in real or counterfeit surprise for a brief space. Then his brows came down, wrinkling in a laugh that sounded genuine enough.

"Say you do! Well, then how do you account for this: I'm more than ready to sell Baird Impleton to you—and to your friends through you—with all his important secrets. Would I do that if I were the fellow, as you try to make out?"

"You admit yourself a liar, then?"

"Then, but not now," quickly interposed the chief of the Big Buffalo Gang. "Then I was trying to carry out my part of the contract with Impleton, but your pretty face came in between, and now—well, it rests entirely with you, Lettice Acton! If you come to my terms, I'll turn it up, and sell Impleton out. I'll reveal all the secret springs which set him in motion, and send his schemes higher than a kite!"

"You can do this?" slowly asked Lettice, yet shrinking from those feverishly glittering eyes.

"I just can! Whether I will or no, depends wholly on you, as I said before. If you—but let me tell you a little more plainly what fate this partner of mine holds in store for you.

"He has sworn to make you his wife. He declined to tell me just why, but I believe there is a pile of money hidden in the background somewhere; if not, why was he so bent on getting rid of your brother?"

Lettice gave a low, choking cry at that speech, but Vaux cared little for her sufferings, just then. He had beaten about the bush long enough, and his sole thought now was to reach a perfect understanding as quickly as possible.

"When you can fully realize this, you can begin to guess what it means if Baird Impleton comes to claim you before you have agreed to my terms: by our contract, I will have to surrender you to his arms!"

"No—kill me, first!" gasped the tortured maiden.

"I'll kill him, if you but give the right word, Lettice Acton!" Kay Vaux swiftly cried. "Swear that you will marry me, instead of Impleton, and I'll turn from this evil life and devote my remaining days to making you

happy! I can do it, Lettice! For—I love you, dear, and love can work even greater marvels than that! Now—you are too agitated to be able to decide fairly, off-hand, so—I'll leave you for a time. But remember—it's either Impleton or me as a husband!"

CHAPTER XXX.

THE BOOMERS HOLD THEIR GRIP.

MEANWHILE, the Big Buffalo Boomers were not idle, although their labors brought less reward than their persistence deserved.

When a general vote confirmed the nomination made by the resigning wagon boss, Clark Frazer at once took charge, and by his orders the poor remnant of their camp was moved over to the timber island where the woodwork for the ruined bridge had been cut.

Freeman, whose leg had been fractured by the falling bridge, had passed through the night with no great harm, and was strong enough to bear removal on a litter.

This was the most serious part of the work, for the Big Buffalo Gang had left precious little else that was worth the trouble of removing, outside of the women and children.

When this was done, lots were drawn to see who should remain at the new camp to guard against a possible swoop of the enemy. Now that the fight had fairly opened, no one could tell how bitterly it might be waged on the part of the Sooners.

"Thar's enough o' ye to sicken even a bigger gang, so long's you keep to kiver an' don't let 'em git the bulge onto ye," said Frazer, grimly. "Ef I was one o' those to stay behind, I'd ax notbin' better then to hev 'em show up—to go down in death, cuss them from top to toe an' back ag'in!"

This fierce sentiment was fully shared by the rest of the Boomers, and their main regret at dividing their forces was a knowledge that both sections could not expect a brush with the enemy.

Clark Frazer led his little company to the hills, there to search for a trail by means of which they might stand a chance of recovering their horses, together with dealing out at least a portion of the punishment the crime of the marauders so richly merited.

Some little time was cut to waste by vain searching for a recent trail, for the ground was far more favorable to flight than to pursuit; but the Boomers were in bitter earnest, and ultimately a clear shout gave notice that a trail was found.

Instantly each Boomer struck out for the point from whence the signal had come, but their joy was dampened when they learned that it was but the track of a single horse, instead of the main force.

"It's my black, an' I kin sw'ar to them!" declared the finder, on his knees beside the prints, pointing out its peculiarities as he spoke.

As no other trail had been struck, it was decided to follow this clew, frail though it seemed. Follow it they did, far into the hills, only to lose it on a rocky stretch of ground, and utterly fail of picking the trail up again.

"It's no use," at length decided Frazer. "The critter has bin close muffled, an' ef we can't hit'nother trail, the quicker we go back to camp, the wiser we'll show ourselves!"

Search was renewed, but not for long. Frazer caught sight of twin columns of smoke, dotted here and there with black balls, after the red-skin style of communication, and be at once collected his men, knowing that they were needed at camp.

Forgetting their horses in fears for the safety of wives and children, the Boomers made all speed toward the smoke-signals. They caught their first breath of relief when they reached a point from whence they could look down across the dreary black level, to the timber-island.

All seemed quiet there, though they could see a couple of the men left as guards, steadily working the blanket by which the smothered smoke was released in dense balls, at regular intervals.

The cause of the recall was quickly ascertained when the camp was reached, and for a short time even the boldest of the Boomers seemed fairly stunned by the tidings received.

A man had come from Big Buffalo, bringing word of its almost total destruction by fire, on the past evening.

Only two or three of the frame shanties had been saved by desperate work on the part of that portion of the colony which had remained to guard the place against possible trouble from the Sooners, while the others took the trip to the border after their families and a fresh supply of lumber.

No lives had been lost, though not one had entirely escaped injury while fighting the fire. A fair portion of the provisions had been saved, thanks to a couple of "cyclone caves," and nearly all of the stock had escaped death.

Matters might have been worse, though it was difficult to view it in that light. And, thanks to the general belief that the fire which swept the town was the same as that which the whirlwind started, the Boomers had not even the poor satisfaction of cursing the Sooners!

"We was too mighty high played out fightin'

fire to come 'fore,' the messenger said in explanation. "We reckoned you was all right, but as you didn't show up, we judged it'd be best to send out to larn the whyfore. Now—what's to be done, fu'st?"

"Hold our grip on the town!" sternly cried Clark Frazer, his massive chest swelling, his nostrils dilating, his smoke-inflamed eyes flashing with unshaken courage. "Ef the town's wiped out, our title's still good? The ground is still thar! An' we'll hold our grip ef all the Sooners this side of Tophet comes in a heap to dispute our claim! That's the fu'st, the last, the only thing to do!"

There was not a single dissenting voice to this fierce declaration. If one such had risen, just then, its owner would hardly have spoken again—for a goodly period, if ever!

Still, deciding to hold the town was not all. There were many different items to be weighed, discussed and decided upon, and though it was risky business dividing up their forces too much, this had to be done just now.

First, the women and children must be guarded to what was left of Big Buffalo, the messenger stating that when he left town, rude shelters were being put up for their accommodation by his fellows, brush and poles being handy for that purpose, thanks to the adjacent timber growing along the river-bank.

Two of the Boomers, who gave promise of making good trailers, were sent back to the hills, to find a trail and follow it to the end, if possible, then hasten back for reinforcements.

A sufficient force was to remain there, cutting timbers and preparing for the arrival of horses from town, by means of which it was hoped the wagons precipitated into the gulch might be dragged up to the level, by making a steep road of corduroy, and employing block and tackle. And this force, well armed, could guard against any attempt on the part of the Sooners to complete the destruction of their property by fire.

During all this delay, nothing had been seen or heard of Uncle Hiram Powell or Fred Acton. They had passed out of sight over the burnt bottom, searching for the remains of their loved one, but without success, either glad or sorrowful, since they had not yet returned.

Christine Brockelmyer had kept very quiet after that fierce outburst of indignation against her one-time lover, and seemed utterly worn out by all she had endured of late.

John Clegg, in the intervals of work, tried to gain a few words with the girl, but she as often silently refused to listen or even look at the love-lorn Boomer.

Although the gulch was impassable for teams, or even horses, it could be crossed by people on foot, and all the more readily since the wagons had been cast into it. Over the topmost of these, women and children picked their way, attended by men bearing the poor remains of their camping outfit.

It was a hard, toilsome march, across the black stretch of ground to the low range of hills beyond, and was rendered all the more arduous by the thick carpet of ashes, caked slightly on top by the recent rain, but set free by this crust breaking beneath their feet, to rise and fill the air which they must breathe.

Through a narrow pass or valley before them, the fire had found its way, to spread again when the other side of the range was reached, then having a fair sweep down upon the town of Big Buffalo.

No longer town! And, though they were prepared for what was before them by the words of the messenger, hardly one of all that weary company could choke back sob, or cry, or fierce curse when they could see all that remained to show for their hopeful labors!

Three small shanties, built of green, freshly sawed wood, the planks standing on end, and planks forming the roofs in place of shingles.

Rude, poor though these buildings were, they seemed like palaces when compared with the stick-and-brush huts which were going up on the sites of the homes destroyed by fire.

But, before the "town" was reached, all had conquered these gloomy emotions, and greeted their friends with smiles and cheery words. What they had lost, could be replaced in time. They had strong hands and willing hearts. They had their land left—ay! their land! Theirs to hold and defend, though all the Sooners in Oklahoma came against them!

If only poor Lettice Acton might be found—alive and well!

CHAPTER XXXI.

CHRISTINE'S LOVERS, AND HOW THEY FARED.

JOHN CLEGG was one of the men selected as guard to escort the women and children to Big Buffalo, and as Christine Brockelmyer was to form one of the party, the stalwart Boomer accepted the nomination with a flush of pleasure.

This was only one more of the changes wrought in him by his victory in this love chase. Time had been when he would have scouted the bare idea of doing "invalid duty," when there was so much harder and sterner work on hand. But now—he could see and think only of Christine.

He proved himself a great aid to—Christine—

during that weary march. Christine permitted him to lend her his arm, to help her across the roughest places, to do all and everything that could lighten the toilsome journey to Big Buffalo.

Christine listened—or did she simply endure?—to his stolen words of love, but she gave him none in return. It was as though the ordeal of fire through which she had been called upon to pass on that eventful day, had left her but the shadow of her old merry, gay, fitful self.

It seemed even worse when the trip was ended and the site of the destroyed town was reached. John Clegg thought surely he would receive his reward then, but—

"No, Yohn," weakly murmured Christine, when he begged her to accompany, or else meet him in the woods where the material for temporary huts was being secured. "I vhas feel me all oafer so weak as a kitty! I must schleep haven! Schleep—only schleep can drife me dose awful fires clean avay! I must schleep, or go me crazy so quick!"

And so it came about that John Clegg was one of the first to volunteer to ride back to the gulch, where the wrecked wagons were to be recovered. And this he did, with a fairly light heart, for Christine had promised him to rest during the afternoon, and to grant him a few minutes for private talk, that evening.

Jesse Rudge, the only other man besides Fred Acton, who had openly entered the lists as Christine's lover, was among the men left at the gulch, so the German lassie was permitted to pass at least a few hours in comparative quiet.

She sought shelter from the warm sun among the trees which grew between town and river, and finding a snug nest of dry leaves where there was little fear of being disturbed by the coming or going of the Boomers cutting and carrying wood, she curled up in it, dropping off into a sound sleep which was a partial amends for lost rest.

Here it was that Fred Acton found her, more through accident than intention, though he was feverishly watching for just such a chance, unable as unwilling to accept that bitter, unjust dismissal.

He had searched in vain for Lettice, living or dead, in company with Uncle Hi. Searched until he could no longer endure this other agony.

"Christine—my Christine!" broke from his lips with a burning passion which he vainly strove to keep within bounds, as he came so unexpectedly upon the girl, curled up in her leafy nest, sleeping so calmly, so peacefully, so utterly unlike himself.

With a low, inarticulate cry, Christine awoke, staring wide-eyed at the intruder for a single breath, then springing to her feet and motioning back as she recognized that haggard face.

"Go avay—I vants me notting more by you! You come to kill me—I see it in dose two eyes!"

"Christine, my darling—"

"Dot is not so! I vhas mo neffer your darling any more!" passionately cried the young woman, stamping her foot angrily. "Vonce—yes! Now? Neffer, Frederick Acton! Neffer more I can me so low down stoopen as dot! I neffer did me dot! It vhas not you I vhas a darling by: it vhas only the man I dakes you for!"

"Christine, why will you persist in so horribly misjudging me? How have I deserved such cruel treatment? Did I not do all that lay in my power to save you from death? Did I not—"

"Stop!" cried the girl, stamping her foot sharply, gesticulating with clinched hand before his face. "You lie when you say dot! You lie when you say you neffer leaf me dot you haft a better chance for your own life saven dot fire front! But—let dot go!"

"Eafen if you vhas all dose: eafen if you vhas a man all oafer, in blace of a coward-cur; it vhas all too late, now! I haft find me a man, already! I haft found me out what it means to leaf all oafer, und drough und drough! I haft make me dot shoice for life!"

"You mean that, Christine?" hoarsely demanded Fred Acton, his face flushing with mingled despair and fierce rage. "You mean to marry that overgrown brute of a John Clegg?"

Instead of replying with the same fierce courage she had so far displayed, Christine shrank from those glittering eyes, and as Acton moved nearer, she turned in flight, screaming shrilly.

"Safe me! Safe me! He vill kill—oh, safe me, efferybody!"

Her frantic screams were not long in rousing the woodcutters, and if Christine had been able to give a clearer, more direct explanation of her alarm, Fred Acton might have found himself under arrest. As it was, when search was made, he had disappeared, and only the footprints among the leaves remained to show that this was anything worse than a wild dream on Christine's part.

"He vhas so vild, so excited, so crazy-man-looking his two eyes in!" the frightened girl murmured, in explanation, when the search was finally given over as vain. "I try to seare him avay, und dot makes him all oafer more vorser! I tell him I haft me no more use by him, und he

make dose eye go burn, und—und—I feels like I vhas killed, already!"

After that, Christine kept away from the woods while the sun lingered, looking and acting nervous and frightened. She avoided conversation with others on that point, yet could not deny, when questioned, that she believed only hasty flight from Fred Acton had saved her life.

"He acts like a man gone crazy! I hope me strhong he neffer meet my—dot he keeps him clean avay dis blace until his mind comes back by him, safe vonce more!"

Although his name never passed her lips, it was not difficult to divine of whom Christine was thinking, at such times. And, naturally enough, this recalled to other minds the fierce threat which Fred Acton had made against John Clegg, after being so terribly beaten by the stalwart Boomer.

The sun had set and dusk was deepening, when a cheer broke from the men at work raising huts to shelter the homeless. They caught sight of several wagons, loaded with lumber, coming at a brisk trot across the level, John Clegg responding to that enthusiastic greeting with a lusty whoop!

Christine hung back until the eyes of her ardent lover singled her out, then fled—to be followed as a matter of course!

John's brows gathered darkly as the girl hurriedly warned him to be constantly on his guard against Fred Acton, who was lurking nigh. But before Christine could fully explain, the approach of others gave her a fright, and lingering barely long enough to promise him a meeting after supper, she broke away in flight.

John Clegg received other warnings that evening, during the interval before supper, but he passed them off with careless jests. He was no coward. He could hold his own against any one man. And now, strong in the knowledge that Christine loved him, and him only, the Boomer felt proof against all the world else.

Hard as he had labored that day, John Clegg seemed to feel the need of neither food nor rest. He tried his level best to cover the joyous anticipation which shone in eyes and from face; but long before he saw Christine steal silently away in the direction of the woods, his secret was a secret no longer, and both men and women looked after his form, slouching off with ostentatious carelessness, smiling quietly at the little comedy.

"Waal, I ain't begrudgin' him of it," remarked one of the weary Boomers, lying back and enjoying his pipe. "John's a good boy, an' the gal's a fiten match for him. But—I'm hopin' he won't hev to fight more'n a crowd, to hold his winnin's."

No names were spoken, but all then present knew to whom allusion was being made. Both Acton and Jesse Rudge were openly declared suitors, and neither was a man likely to meekly yield to defeat.

Once fairly beyond the firelight, Christine lingered until she knew John was following, then hastened on to the edge of the woods. Here she was joined by Clegg, and arm-in-arm they moved slowly into the shade, as under the trees alone could they feel safe against intrusion or accidental interruption.

Naturally enough, John greatly preferred to talk about Christine and himself and the blissful future just opening before them; but for once the maiden preferred dwelling on a less sentimental subject.

She insisted on describing that meeting with Fred Acton, and though she may have been honest enough in thought, she colored that interview far more highly than the facts justified.

No doubt this was owing in part to the sudden fright which had overtaken her when she saw that frenzied light come into the eyes of her rejected and reviled lover, but in main it must have been because she feared Acton would seek revenge on both by striking her present companion.

"I fear me much—so much, my Yohn!" she murmured, hiding her face in his willing bosom, yielding for the moment to his firm embrace.

"I can me not keep avay dot awful sight! I see me you—not as now, but as a—Oh, Yohn! schwear mehardt you vill keep a watch outd a:inst dot crazy-mad boy!"

Of course John gave the promise, and equally of course he forgot the words as soon as spoken. Why not? What man with blood in his veins could think long of an enemy, while in his arms was a sweetheart?

Neither of them saw or heard aught of the dark, crouching shape that crossed a narrow thread of moonlight sifting through the trees. Neither one of the lovers so much as suspected the fact that their every word was counted, their every step, their every kiss and car, counted, by one in whose swiftly-throbbing heart a savage jealousy was crying out—kill, kill!"

"I'll run the whelp clean out o' the country, Christine, ef he tries to make any further trouble," said Clegg, as they slowly strolled on through the woods. "But—I don't think he'll do that. Of course it cut him terrible d—losin' you, my pritty! That alone was plenty noug to upset a sturdier brain than Fred's ever owned. Then, too, losin' his sister he'll

turn his wits wrong. But he'll git over it in time, an' I reckon ye needn't worry over him any more."

It was only because of his great love for Christine that John Clegg forced himself to dwell even so long on that subject. Now, having made that sacrifice, he insisted on coming to a more perfect understanding as to their future.

No need to report his words in detail. This love was turning John Clegg into an eloquent pleader at Cupid's bar, but his words were much the same as all lovers use, sweet enough when poured into the right pair of ears, but hardly a treat for the unsympathetic.

Enough that he pleaded his cause as only a true-hearted lover can. Enough that he spoke like a man, promising nothing more than he firmly intended to perform, asking for nothing more than he was eager to give in return.

And Christine listened with bowed head and downcast eyes. When she spoke, it was in whispers too low for any but the ears of an ardent lover to catch aught. Then—John's arms were wrapped around her yielding form, and his lips warmly gave thanks to hers for the glad tidings they so softly, even bashfully conveyed!

And from his covert hard by, that dark, evil figure took notes!

Christine had long since stolen away from that interview, but John Clegg had not returned to town in her company.

The moon moved on, and a narrow strip of its light gradually crept up to and along a grim object—the body of a man, with a knife buried between his shoulders!

CHAPTER XXXII.

CALLING FOR VENGEANCE.

THERE was no John Clegg to partake of that early breakfast, and more than one sly jest was broken over the fact, by those who had seen him depart on that loverly expedition the night before.

Men must sleep, even if they are in love, and if they spend the night in gazing at the moon, they are apt to be late in greeting the rising sun.

But when the hour came for sending the horses back to the gulch for other wagons, loud calls were made for the missing Boomer: calls which received no answer from the man whose name was sounded.

Still, no evil was thought by his comrades until after a vain search proved that he was nowhere in town. Even then the anxiety was little more than impatience that he should have departed without telling any one of his intentions.

"Dollars to cents he had a kick-up 'long 'o his gal, last night," growled one of the Boomers; then, turning to his wife, he asked her to find Christine and learn the truth if possible.

Christine was found asleep in one of the little huts, and when awakened, she seemed too dazed to fully comprehend what had gone wrong. But, as soon as she could be made to understand that John Clegg was missing, she gave a sharp cry of terror, clasping both hands over her heart as though to still its mad throbings.

"Gone? Yohn gone? My Yohn?"

"Anyway, we can't find him," soothingly said the woman. "Didn't he say anything to you, last night, about—"

"Last night? Oh!" breaking forth into a wild, agonized scream and darting forth from the hut, flinging up her arms one moment, then clasping both hands about her temples. "My Yohn! He is killed! Help! help me to find my poor maus!"

Sobbing and crying, looking and acting more like a maniac than a sane creature, Christine fled through town toward the woods where she had parted with her lover the night before.

She paid no attention to the shouts of the Boomers, though she avoided the grasp of such as she passed by in her swift flight. She repeatedly called aloud upon her lover, mingling his name with wild denunciations of his foul assassin.

Such intense emotion quickly exhausts even the strongest, and though the distance to the edge of the woods was not great, just at its edge, the young woman flung up her arms, clasped her temples with both hands, then sunk down in a shivering, moaning, nerveless heap.

The excited Boomers, men and women, gathered around her, but Christine was still able to speak, and hysterically waved them off.

"Not me—my Yohn!" she cried, huskily, motioning them toward the woods. "Find my Yohn! Bring him to me if—No! he is gone die! He's dead! He is murdered by—Go, I say me! Go—my Yohn!"

Even yet unable to believe the truth of that awful fear, the Boomers were sufficiently impressed by her wild words and wilder actions to hasten the search for the missing man.

That search ended only too soon!

A wild shout from one of their number quickly collected the Boomers around the spot where poor John Clegg lay prone on his face, his strong fingers half buried in the leaf-mold, the polished haft of a knife rising above his broad shoulders, the blade hidden from sight in the flesh beneath!

"Stop!" hoarsely cried one of the search-party, motioning back his comrades, then pointing with unsteady hand to the fatal weapon. "Look! Mark it, all of ye, men! Who among ye ever set eyes on that handle afore?"

Not one of all present but what had seen and even handled a weapon precisely like that, even if not the same knife; and it was a tool not readily forgotten when once closely examined.

All recognized that curiously chased, silver-plated haft, but only one man was cool enough or hardy enough to pronounce the owner's name.

"It's Fred Acton's knife!"

A quick, shivering breath assailed nearly every one within sound of that voice. Strong men turned paler than they had at the sight of the body, and women shrunk tremblingly away, some sobbing, others dazed, a few giving vent to low but heart-felt sobs.

"Wuss luck—but they's no denyin' of it!" gloomily spoke up the man who had discovered the body, and whose warning hands had kept the excited Boomers back until they could fairly realize the terrible discovery his own eyes had made.

"He couldn't a' stuck him own self, nuther!" ventured another of the group, drawing a long breath.

All eyes were once more fixed on that bright handle. No, it was planted in a spot where even the most utterly insane being could not possibly have sunk the blade. And—only a murderous hand, steeled by a murderous heart, could have sunk that blade to its very hilt through so much flesh and muscle!

"It's a terrible thing to say an' do, neighbors," huskily muttered the Boomer, sinking on his knees by the side of the body, though even yet his trembling hand had hesitated to touch that deadly tool. "I'd heap sight ruther some o' the rest o' ye hed found him—since he *had* to be found like this—but now I must call on all o' ye to bear in mind jest *how* he was found, an' how ye all see this knife stickin' into the body. Fer—it's a thing as bes got to be paid fer, mind ye!"

Eye for eye, tooth for tooth, life for life!

Never more fixed in times of old than it is in our day! And never so surely carried out to the very letter of the law, as it is in the more recently settled sections of our country, where justice is more than a mockery, and law something more than a fiction.

Already the first sensation of awe at death, was giving place to thoughts of vengeance against the living!

The Boomer, having performed what he felt was a sacred duty devolving upon himself, grasped the silver haft and started to withdraw the fatal blade—to start back with a husky ejaculation as he both felt and saw that life yet lingered in that form!

A faint tremor crept over the muscular form. A short, gasping breath rattled in the throat of the seeming corpse, and its head lifted the merest trifle, as though moved by the breath trying to escape in spite of the leaf-mold upon which his face was lying.

"Stop! don't pull it out, Marston!" cried one of the Boomers, who had once studied medicine and surgery. "Here! some o' you women make me bandages and scrape lint—lively, now!"

Although he had never actually practiced at his profession, and though it was many years since he had even thought of brushing up the knowledge won in early manhood, the Boomer felt all the latent instinct awakening, and at once took charge of the case.

To all but him it seemed an utterly hopeless one, but he would not admit such a thing as failure, in words, whatever may have been his thoughts.

The other Boomers, save such as he named to assist him, stood by in anxious silence, or slowly moved about the spot searching for further evidence against the assassin.

With his own hand the doctor removed the knife and applied the bandages, quickly checking the hemorrhage which began freely the instant the weapon was drawn from its living sheath. And not until then was the body actually lifted from the position in which it had been discovered.

Either the removal of the knife, or the change of position, or both combined, brought back a glimmer of consciousness to poor John Clegg.

His lids feebly lifted, his lips parted, he huskily muttered the name of his loved one:

"Christine—where is—"

Nothing more, and that barely clear enough to be rightly interpreted by the sharpest of ears; but it was sufficient.

"Where is the girl?" asked the doctor, glancing around. "It's running a great risk, but letting him long for her, without gratifying his wishes, would be still worse. Bring the girl, if you have to carry her in your arms!"

No thought for the maiden: his sole care for his patient! In which he proved himself a true physician, after all!

There was no need for so many words on his part, however. The moment after John Clegg pronounced the name of his sweetheart, more

than half the women present were running in quest of Christine!

"But they did not have to carry her in their arms: Christine came running to the spot, her face pale as that of a corpse, her strong agitation beyond question genuine.

"Yohn—my boy Yohn!" she gasped, rushing wildly to the spot and sinking to her knees by the side of the Boomer, who gave a faint sigh and fainter smile of love—then closed his eyes, insensible once more. "Dead? My poor Yohnny-boy dead? Who vhas it so cruel bad as—"

Christine broke off abruptly as she caught sight of the fatal weapon, sticking in the ground close by. She snatched it up, glared at blade and handle for a moment, then cried out fiercely:

"Fred Acton's knife! He killed my Yohn! Where is he now? Find him out for me! I'll kill him back ag'in! I schwear me I kill him!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CALLED TO ACCOUNT.

CHRISTINE stared wildly at the blade, still showing signs of the deadly work which some cruel hand had forced upon it. She held it above her head where all could see her pale lips moving rapidly but without audible speech.

She seemed to be registering an oath of swift and relentless vengeance on the slayer of her lover.

A brief space thus, then she brought the fatal weapon down, nearer to her lips, as though she would seal the vow with a kiss.

Only to shrink back, wild-eyed, as she more clearly noted those red stains on blade and hilt.

"No! I can me not kis!" she cried, hysterically. "It is all oaf'r real! It vhas—Oh, Yohn! My Yohnny-boy! Who vhas it so easil-bad in heart an aple to kill a mans like you? Who vhas—Ha!" springing to her feet and glaring around the company of Boomers, her eyes seemingly on fire as they rested in turn on each pale face. "Where is he? Where is Fred Acton? Find him—lunt him down! I will kill him by my own hand—for he killed my Yohnny-boy!"

All in an instant her savage fire did away. She dropped the tell-tale weapon, clasped both hands to her temples, turned around until her wild, dazed look fell upon that motionless figure.

"Dead! He vhas go die? Und—he leaf me here back?"

She staggered forward a pace, then sank on her knees by the side of the unconscious Boomer. The doctor was supporting his head and doing what lay in his power to revive the wounded man, but Christine paid no attention to him, any more than she did to the others gathered around. For her there was but one being there; the man to whose ardent love-vows she had so shyly listened the night last passed.

"You vhas make some shokes by me, Yohnny-boy," she said, making an effort to laugh, more chilling than had been her wildest cries of grief. "You play scare me—nein? It vhas a lie—who say me you vhas go die? Who vhas so al oaf'r vicked as dot? Die? You, my mans? You go off deadt, und neffer—neffer vonce call Christine?"

"Take her away, some o' you women!" sharply called out the doctor, using his free hand to keep the stricken girl back as she would have fallen on the neck of her lover. "It'll ruin his last chances for life, and you'd ought to have sense enough to know as much without waiting for me to tell you!"

Christine struggled, but feebly. Her intense emotion had weakened her greatly, and though her eyes clung to the body of John Clegg to the very latest, she was led away by those who sought to make her understand they were acting for the good of her lover.

"Not deadt! My Yohn? But I see him all laidt out—so cold und still—so still he neffer say a wordt by me when—No! I neffer hear him say a kind wordt no more! He vhas deadt—my poor loafer is deadt! Und my heart go die too!"

The doctor, after careful examination, decided that not only was the spark of life flickering still, but he believed that with proper care and attention John Clegg might be restored to life and health!

"The first thing is to get him under shelter. After that, I'll do all man can to pull him through," was his conclusion.

Where strong arms and willing hearts were so numerous, work is promptly done, and ere long the blood-stained figure was being carried out of the woods and toward the little collection of rude cabins and ruder huts.

Christine had already been taken there by sympathizing members of her own sex, but as she heard the approach of the litter-bearers, she broke away from her guardians and rushed forth with sobbing cries and woeful moans to meet the body of her lover.

"Keep her back!" excitedly cried the doctor, wildly waving his arms, much as a woman tries to frighten a brood of chickens off her flower-beds.

Unfortunately, as it proved, he was on the further side of the litter, and the Boomers failed to catch his meaning until it was too late.

Sobbing, crying, wringing her hands more like a maniac than a sane being, Christine rushed forward, flinging herself on the seeming corpse of her lover.

The shock was too much for the hastily-constructed litter. The handles snapped, and poor John Clegg fell like a lump of clay to the ground, Christine sharing his fall!

"Oh! what a cussed pack of—that does settle it!" fairly howled the doctor, making as though he would tear his hair out by handfuls, but evidently thinking better of it. "Let me—git out o' the way, you crazy fool!"

He gave poor Christine a thrust with his foot that rolled her over at least once more, then devoted himself to his patient.

In obedience to his stern orders, the Boomers fell back, giving him plenty of room for work. Even Christine, pale and seemingly dazed by that unlucky accident, made no attempt to interfere, moving restlessly back and forth, wringing her hands and smothering her hysterical sobs.

It was plain enough to be seen from the face of the physician how seriously he regarded the case, and as moments passed on without his looking up from that examination to assure the watchers no serious harm had resulted, few among the Boomers were taken wholly by surprise when the doctor coldly, gravely spoke:

"It's all over, neighbors. Poor Clegg is stone dead!"

"No! no!" cried Christine, springing forward and grasping the doctor by his shoulders, fiercely shaking him much as a mother might a refractory son. "Say me not so! He is not go diel! My Yohn—say me for sure he vill liv—I bray me you all oafer!"

"Let go of me!" spluttered the doctor, turning crimson with rage and mortification, forgetting to whom he was speaking. "He's dead—and you killed him, confound you, woman!"

Christine staggered back like one smitten a mortal blow. She gave a strange, choking cry, then flung up her hands and sprung away to where one of the horses used on the past day for hauling timbers, stood nibbling over a pile of leafy boughs.

Tearing free its halter, Christine leaped upon the back of the startled animal, urging it away in reckless flight, screaming and wailing like a maniac.

It seemed as though those cruel words had finished the work begun by the assassination of her lover, and hardly one who stared in helpless bewilderment at her wild actions, felt a doubt as to her having completely lost her senses.

"Ketch her!" hoarsely cried Jesse Rudge, starting in pursuit. "If she don't pull up—Christine! You'll knock your brains—"

He left the sentence unfinished. Even he seemed to have fallen under the spell; even he doubted whether she had any brains left!

Christine paid no attention to those shouts, to the chase that was made. She drew up the branch to which the halter was still tied, and furiously lashed her frightened mount, heading direct for the point of woods where John Clegg had been found.

Amidst her maniacal screams and wails, his name could be now and again distinguished, together with the name of Fred Acton, on whose head she appeared to be calling down the blackest vengeance of Heaven!

She was lost to sight at the edge of the woods, but the excited Boomers rushed rapidly along in chase, entering at the same point, following the trail, too plain to admit of mistake even for an instant.

At each yard of advance, they feared to come across her corpse, torn from the frightened horse by low bough, or hurled against a tree-trunk through some sudden shying; but on the trail led them, and still the dreaded discovery was not made.

"Straight for the drink!" panted one of the foremost in that strange chase. "Good Lord help her if she's hit the sands!"

Not a glimpse had been caught of the frantic woman since she entered the timber. Not a sound was heard as they pressed on in chase, though they had used all possible speed. But the maniac had lashed her mount at each leap, and her wild cries had added to its speed; not one of the Boomers had ever dreamed such powers lay wrapped up in its hide!

Still no sound, no cry for help, no sight of the poor girl! And then the trail led them directly out upon the bank of the river, here falling almost directly down to the silently flowing water; and though a glance at the hoof-marks showed that the animal had tried to stop itself on the very brink, all could see that it had been forced to take the leap from land to water.

"Look!" cried one of the Boomers, pointing down-stream. "Thar's the boss, but—whar's the gal?"

Far below them, half in and half out of the water, the animal was striving desperately to climb up the steep bank. But—nowhere could they catch sight or hear sound of poor Christine!

Still trying to hope, the Boomers rushed down the river-bank to the point where the horse was fighting for life. The animal was rescued without much difficulty, but—no Christine!

When even the most sanguine ceased their vain search for the missing one, there was a brief silence, during which eye met eye and brain read brain.

To doubt further was impossible. Christine, crazed as her brain assuredly must have been, could not have escaped from the river, even if she had tried her utmost, even if that awful plunge had not at once disabled her. So—

"The pore gal is gone!" hoarsely muttered one of the Boomers, his breath coming short and sharp, his hands clinching tightly, his eyes all aglow as they flashed from face to face. "John Clegg is dead. Who done it? Who killed 'em both?"

A silence that lasted for nearly a score of seconds; then, as by an irresistible impulse, nearly a dozen stern voices cried aloud:

"Fred Acton butchered 'em both! Hunt him down! Lynch the murderer!"

It is an awful sound, this yell for human blood! No one in whose ears it has ever rung, can ever forget the sound, though he or she may live a century.

There was no thought now of further search for the dead: they must find the living—to kill!

Turning back toward town, the Boomers pressed on in silence that was even more terrible than their first fierce outburst. Their faces did the speaking. Death to the criminal was written in plain letters on each and every one.

It seemed as though fate was playing into their hands, for hardly had the Boomers cleared the edge of the timber, than they caught sight of first one figure, then another, between them and the town.

They saw the second form, but it was only to forget it as quickly, for in the nearest man they instantly recognized Fred Acton.

"Run him down! Don't let him git away!"

"Don't shoot onless yehev to!" sharply cried another. "Save the devil to pull hemp!"

Fred saw that wild rush, and must have caught some of those savage words, for he faltered for a moment, then fell back. He did not actually run, for he kept his pale, haggard face toward the Boomers. But he seemed to recognize something of the awful peril which menaced him, though it was much as a man sees impending death in a troubled dream.

"Halt! or we'll riddle ye! Halt! an' surrender to the law!"

"Halt, you!" thundered a clear, stern voice, as Uncle Hi Powell rushed forward, interposing his dauntless self just in time to save his adopted son from going down before that fierce rush. "What have you got against my boy? Back I'll die for him, unless you can prove a better right than mine! Back, I say!"

His pistols were out and cocked. His haggard face was flushed with anger and stern resolve. He meant every word he uttered, and none knew the old wagon boss better than those men now held at bay.

"Hold back, boys!" cried their leading member. "Even Uncle Hi won't stan' out to save a dirty murderer when he knows what we know!"

"Who is the murderer, Alf Kline?" sternly cried Uncle Hi.

"Him—your boy Fred! He stabbed John Clegg last night in the back, and then driv'—"

"You lie! Fred was in my company all last night—on my oath!"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

THE LAST HOUR OF GRACE.

CAPTAIN KAY VAUX was as good as his word, and left Lettice Acton alone with her thoughts to make her final decision.

He took care that she was comfortably provided for; that she had food and drink in abundance, together with a fairly good bed for resting upon. He could not supply her with a change of clothes, badly as the poor girl needed them, thanks to the fiery ordeal through which she had been forced to pass; but he could and did supply ointment for her burns, and sent a half-breed squaw in to lend what assistance might be required.

He kept away from that rock chamber throughout all the next day, and only sent Lettice a brief note, by the squaw, warning her that the hour of grace was rapidly passing; that he would call upon her for a final decision before the hour for sleeping came around.

He asked for no answer, and Lettice sent him none. But when the hour which he had fixed upon rolled around—the same, as near as may be, at which John Clegg stole away from his jesting comrades to follow Christine Brockelman into the timber—the chief of the Big Buffalo Gang entered the little cell where his captive was waiting.

He paused at the entrance, knitting his shaggy brows while gazing keenly into that pale, worn, yet composed face. He was trying to read his answer before her lips should formulate it; but for once he was forced to admit himself baffled.

That pale face, forced to composure, might mean resolute defiance, or the despair of a woman who has brought her mind to accept one evil in order to escape another still greater.

"Well, Miss Acton," he said, finally, stepping forward with a low bow. "I'm glad to find

you looking more like your charming self than when I was forced to tear myself away, last night. Of course you received my note?"

Lettice bowed, but said no word in answer.

Captain Vaux flushed up, his eyes beginning to glitter wickedly. He would far rather have been met with tears and pleadings, rather than with this cold, almost stony silence.

Doubtless Lettice was acting for the best, as she viewed the matter; but the course she was taking only served to fire that villain, and render him all the more determined to have his will.

"Come, loosen your tongue, my charming girl!" he cried, drawing nearer, putting out a hand as though to receive hers. "You haven't forgotten the choice I left you to make. Now—am I to be welcomed as a friend, or as an enemy?"

"You left me a choice to make," slowly responded Lettice, shrinking away from his touch, but in no other wise betraying aught like fear. "Did you stop to reflect that it was merely a choice between two evils?"

"Then show your wisdom by choosing the least, my dear," laughed Vaux.

"Meaning yourself, of course?"

"Why not? That I've been what the goody-goody people will call a bad boy, I'll not take the trouble to deny. But this much I will say, and say it in sober earnest: by the side of Baird Impleton, I stand out as chalk against pitch! An angel of light, by the side of a demon of darkness!"

He broke off abruptly, flushing hotly as he caught that flickering smile on the fair face before him. Although she knew the peril which surely menaced her, and knew that her wisest plan would be to at least attempt to conciliate this villain, Lettice could not entirely control her facial muscles, and this claiming angelic semblance, coming from such a source, was a little too much.

"In one breath, Lettice Acton—will you swear by all you hold good and holy, to become my legal wife?"

"I will make no such promise, sir!"

For the next few moments Lettice Acton stood in fully as great peril as when she saw those cruel flames closing in about her, without a visible hand near enough to lend her aid.

She clenched, despite the efforts she made to stand firm. But Kay Vaux, after a short, fierce struggle against temptation, managed to gain the upper hand of his vicious temper, and spoke more quietly:

"I'll not be so cruel as to take your first word as final, Miss Acton. I'll give you yet another chance to redeem yourself."

"You don't know what sort of fellow this Baird Impleton really is, or you'd jump at the hand of Satan himself should it be the only chance offered you! And—let me tell you another thing: I fully expect Baird Impleton to pay me a visit this very night, for the express purpose of claiming you from my hands!"

"You say you are not all evil, sir," earnestly spoke Lettice, bravely following along the line she had marked out during those weary hours of grace. "Prove as much! Show yourself a man, not a devil! Show to the world that you have not entirely forgotten the mother who bore you! Pay a tribute to that mother's memory—for she surely is not in the land of the living at the present time!"

"What makes you think that?" ejaculated Vaux, in surprise.

"Because, if she was still living, you could not so shamefully torture one of her own sex," swiftly replied Lettice, keenly watching the effect of her words, but with a sinking heart.

She had counted on making an effective stroke, but as she saw that mocking smile spread over his face, as she heard his low, sneering laugh, she knew that her hopes were based on worse than nothing.

"I'm like Topsy, Miss Acton; I jest growed! I never had a mother, so your little touch of pathos turns out to be bathos instead. But this isn't business, my dear child!"

"The situation stands just like this: you are far too tempting a morsel to be let go free for some ignorant lout to snap up off-hand. You can never go out to the sunlight again until you can go as a lawfully wedded wife! So, the only question remaining for decision, is the name you are to bear for the future.

"I expect Baird Impleton here to-night. He will come, prepared to pay the price agreed for what services I and my men could render him in this little job. If he does come, if he offers me my full pay for work accomplished, there is only one method of declaring our bargain off."

"Swear that you will marry me when I bring a man authorized to perform such a ceremony, and I'll not only break with Impleton, but I'll turn him over to suffer for his crimes against—"

Captain Vaux left that sentence incomplete, for just then he caught the sounds of a rapid approach, and turned in that direction with a black scowl disfiguring his face, an oath upon his thin lips.

"Back, you infernal idiot!" he snarled, viciously, as he caught an indistinct view of a

human figure at the entrance to the dimly-lighted chamber. " Didn't I leave strict orders that no one was to venture in this quarter, without my express call?"

" Waal, boss, ef I hearn them orders, I reckoned—" began a muffled voice in reply, the speaker moving forward at the same time.

" What!" ejaculated Captain Vaux, recognition in face and voice. " It is you, then, Dan Devoe?"

" What they is left o' me, boss," mumbled the other, his voice rendered indistinct by the bandages with which his face was swathed and his features almost entirely masked.

" What brought you here? Never mind—I've no time to waste on trifles, just now. Skip, you!"

" But, boss—"

" Get out, I tell you!" angrily snarled Vaux, lifting a clinched hand to lend emphasis to his commands.

Instead of beating a retreat in compliance, the fellow came still nearer, mumbling something indistinct about the Boomers; but as his figure came more nearly under the twinkling glow of the candle, the Chief of the Big Buffalo Gang detected something that drew a choking cry from his lips, and his right hand shot downward toward the weapons in the belt about his middle.

Never to touch them consciously, however, for, swift as thought and active as an angered panther, the counterfeit Dan Devoe sprung upon him, striking fiercely with a heavy stone until then hidden in his right hand, his left hand shooting out straight for that sinewy throat.

Captain Vaux fell to the rock floor with only a gasping, wheezing groan, and as his assailant fell on top of him, the clear, earnest words came from his muffled lips:

" I'm Darling! For your life, don't cry out, Lettice!"

But the warning was not needed. Terrified though she was, Lettice had too nearly lost all hopes for herself, to cry out through fear for another, or because of bloodshed or violence.

She did utter a low choking sound as she caught that name and recognized that voice, but that was all.

Dandy Darling held his grip until sure his enemy was actually stunned, then he tore away his belt of arms, and hastily bound his prey.

Then he sprung up, tearing the bandages from his face, just in time to catch the falling form of the maiden in his strong arms. No doubt as a restorative, he kissed her—and actually seemed to enjoy doing so!

CHAPTER XXXV.

DANDY DARLING KEEPS HIS VOW.

It was hardly fair, though, to take such an advantage of his greater strength and of the occasion, knowing as he surely must that Lettice would not dare call out for help after his quick warning. And, should she call for aid to help her repulse this new and truly dangerous assailant, who could answer that call?

Only the tools of Captain Kay Vaux, and their coming would mean his rescue, which would mean her recapture and sacrifice to either Vaux or Impleton. So—well, the poor, hunted, persecuted girl simply did as the chief of the Big Buffalo Gang advised her, shortly before: chose the least of the evils, and neither cried aloud nor struggled frantically beneath that infliction.

Just how long Dandy Darling would have seen fit to practice the art of kissing and hugging, can only be surmised, for his exercises in that direction were cut short by a gasping moan escaping the lips of their fallen foeman. This seemed to bring the Daisy back to earth, and resigning Lettice for the moment, he turned to Captain Vaux and quickly completed the work so well begun.

Dandy Darling had come prepared for almost any sort of emergency, it seemed, for he was never at a lack for aught that could be of use in keeping a dangerous enemy silent and harmless so long as he was left to his own devices.

Before Vaux had fairly recovered his sense, Dandy Darling had him bound hand and foot, with a snug gag fastened between his jaws, and crowded into a corner of the chamber where the irregular wall lent its aid to the shadows to conceal the knave from sight.

The last part of this work was done while keeping his own face screened from view, though he more than half believed Vaux had recognized him as he really was, not as he had appeared in the guise of the wounded firebug.

Having effectually disposed of the chief for the present, Darling returned to Lettice, who seemed hardly able even yet to fully believe the marvelous truth.

Rending this in her face, and possibly thinking that his enthusiastic greeting required a little explanation, which Lettice might find in the arduous labors he had performed while attempting to make his vow of rescuing her good, the Daisy quickly gave a brief of what had happened him after she lost sight of him at the drift.

The account was far too long to give in detail, and what he did find time to whisper, so confused and bewildered the poor girl that, actually, she could hardly tell the difference between his

lips imparting thrilling information to her ears, or to her own lips.

It was so strange, so utterly bewildering! She had seen him fall before those treacherous shots—had seen his murderers vainly search for his body—had never once dared doubt his death!

Yet—here he was, not only alive, but filling her ears with glad hopes! Promising to save her from all her enemies! Offering to restore her to her anxious friends!

Enough to completely upset the brain of one who had suffered so sorely and so long; of one who had almost abandoned all hope of anything happier than a speedy death: for that would be her choice in preference to marrying either Captain Vaux or Baird Impleton.

When all this is remembered, is it so strange that her intense emotions should overcome her? Or that, with a glad, sobbing cry, her arms should lock about that bending neck, her trembling lips answer and thank him at one and the same instant?

Heart to heart, lip to lip: then Dandy Darling drew back enough for their eyes to squarely meet. He looked into those misty depths for a brief space, then softly whispered:

" Is it true? Do you really mean what I see, Lettice, dear?"

Instead of the plain answer which he hoped for, Lettice drooped her head on his breast, sobbing hysterically.

" Forgive me, Letty," he said, soothingly, patting her head with the hand not strictly required to lend her support. " I was a brute to ask so much—so soon! Don't worry, but—for the sake of all those whom you love or care for, please don't give way now!"

" Is there—can we even hope to escape from this horrible place?"

" Not only hope, but we're bound to accomplish it, little lady!" the Daisy said, with a low, confident laugh.

He began to realize how foolishly he had permitted himself to act in his moment of victory over such long odds, and though even a strong man finds it hard enough to practice self-denial, Darling was able to put aside that barely tasted cup of bliss, trusting to the future for his full reward.

With a jest or two at the transformation, he deftly replaced the bandages which, with the addition of short hair and an appropriated hat, had enabled him to play the part of Dan Devoe without question or suspicion. And then he gave Captain Kay Vaux a brief but thorough investigation, making sure his gag could not be ejected nor his bonds removed without other agency than his own.

" I hate like sin to leave him here!" the Daisy muttered, fully as much to himself as to Lettice. " He'd be worth his weight in gold as a hostage, even without counting the delight of the Boomers at getting their grip fairly on the one who—But it's no use thinking!"

Taking Lettice by an arm, bidding her be brave and fear nothing, repeating his assurance that the way was fairly clear before them, Dandy Darling took down the one candle and made use of its light until they had fairly left the rock-chamber for a narrow, winding passage, by means of which they were to leave that evil den.

Dandy Darling soon after extinguished the light, as being more likely to bring them danger than aid.

" It's a plain road through, Lettice," he gave assurance to his trembling charge. " I made sure of that, as I did of all else, before getting down to actual work. It took time, and each minute seemed like a month to me, while thinking of all you were surely suffering, but—"

" Don't—please!" huskily murmured Lettice, clinging closer to his arm. " I'm trying hard—so hard!—to forget it all! If I could only once make it seem like a dream—"

" The dream is all before you, little lady!" whispered Dandy, his lips just brushing her cheek in the dark. " A never-ending dream of perfect bliss! Where you are queen, and all the rest are your happy, loving subjects! Where no one will dare to even think of evil, and all that has been grief or trouble in the past, is blotted out forever!"

Really, this prairie sport was progressing finely!

And yet, he might have shown far less wisdom. His perfect faith in a happy ending lent Lettice something of the strength and courage she so sorely required after all she had been through, and that was well worth the risk of being deemed " a bit soft!"

The passage was threaded without interruption from outsiders, and only pausing long enough to make sure there were no enemies lurking near the opening, Dandy Darling led Lettice into the fresh night air, and down the wooded side of the butte.

For, not a little to her amazement, the maiden recognized the curiously shaped mound which had been first to suggest the name for their little town in Oklahoma: Big Buffalo!

" Big Buffalo Butte" it is, sure enough, Lettice," nodded Darling as she turned to him for confirmation. " The thing is hollow as a drum, and holds secrets which go far to explain all that has happened your little colony, or I'm a mighty poor guesser! But there's no time to

spare for explaining all I found out, thanks to gentle Billy Blue, just at present."

" You fear pursuit, then?" faltered Lettice, with a nervous glance around through the thickly shadowed shadows.

" Not exactly *fear* it, but you are far too precious a prize to be let run a particle more danger than is absolutely unavoidable. So—are you strong enough to ride a horse, little lady?"

" Through fire to escape from that evil wretch!" declared the maiden, with unexpected but entirely welcome vigor.

" My—*gracious!*" almost choking as he forced himself to swallow a far different word, and substitute that exclamation. " And such a small-caliber villain as the captain actually thought he could bend your will to suit his pleasure, did he? Well, the best of men can't help making a mistake now and then, so I don't know as it's worth while to marvel at a sinner doing the same thing!"

Lettice made no reply. Why should she? Even Dandy Darling could not feel its point? But he knew that he must say something to cover that slip up of the tongue, and he rattled off the first words that came handy.

A few minutes carried them to where he had carefully concealed a couple of good horses, "lifted" from the Sooners for this particular purpose. Both were fully equipped, though he apologized for asking her to utilize a man's saddle.

Mounting, they rode away at a cautious pace until far enough to run little risk of being overheard, then headed for home and friends!

Little did they dream how much depended on their arrival!

CHAPTER XXXVI.

DANDY DARLING DRIVES A BARGAIN.

THE would-be lynchers recoiled a bit, more from those stern words than from the menacing muzzles which stared them fairly in the face.

If what Uncle Hi Powell said was true, then Fred Acton could not be guilty of that dastardly deed. But—was it true?

" You're a good man, Uncle Hi," gravely spoke up Alfred Kline. " We all know that you wouldn't tell a lie to save your own life, but—"

" He's lying to save his boy!" boarsely interposed another of the Boomers. " Shell he make it win, men? Shell pore John Clegg go onpaid fer? Shell the little Dutch gal—"

" Hang 'em both, ef it comes to that!"

" Back, or I'll cover the level with dead men!" sternly thundered the grand old man, his face pale as death, but his eyes on fire. " Back, I say! Fred has killed no one, and I'm going his bail! You can't touch one hair of his head without first running me down, and—if there's any white men in this outfit, let them step forward to defend the right!"

" I'm with ye, Uncle Hi!" cried Jesse Rudge, facing his recent mates and covering them with his pistols while backing to a position beside the menaced couple. " Fred never done it, boys, an'—"

" Hold bard, all of you!" came a clear, shrill shout from some little distance. " He is innocent, and I can prove it!"

All eyes turned in that direction, and now the Boomers recognized what they might have done before, only for their fierce passions and deep interest in this arrest; the swift clatter of horses' hoofs on the burnt ground, rapidly approaching them.

A man in advance, gesticulating as he came. Not far behind him a woman—young and—

" Letty! my darling! my little girl!" cried Uncle Hi, dropping his weapons and forgetting all else as he rushed toward that bewildering vision—for, surely, it could not be a glad reality?

If the Boomers had not been so completely thunderstruck by this totally unexpected turn of affairs, it might have fared poorly with Fred Acton. But before any one could even think of completing his arrest, Dandy Darling took a flying leap from the saddle and alighted at his side, letting his jaded, foam-flecked horse scatter the Boomers by plunging directly through the crowd before it could come to a halt.

" What's the racket, Fred?" hurriedly asked the Daisy, hoping to get at least an inkling of the situation before the Boomers could rally again. " What're you charged with, anyhow?"

" Murder—no less!" fiercely cried one of the Boomers, who was near enough to catch and cool enough to rightly interpret those hasty sentences. " An' ef that's any men to back me up in seein' common justice done, he'll pull hemp afore the hour is over, too!"

" Is that so?" coolly drawled Darling, his pistols coming out and their hammers going back after a decidedly business-like fashion. " If you really mean it all, pardner, just shape a noose to fit my dainty neck, too, please!"

" What is it your business, dug-gun ye?" with an angry snarl, facing those weapons without flinching. " Who air ye, anyhow?"

" A Deputy United States Marshal, for one thing," was the ready response, as he gently tapped Fred Acton on a shoulder with the

muzzle of a pistol, adding: "And as such I arrest this gentleman. Now—who will attempt to take him out from under my wing?"

Before a reply could be given to this cool speech, both Uncle Hi and Lettice came up, the maiden clinging to her brother in tears, the veteran picking up his pistols and again standing on guard.

"They ain't no law in Oklahoma!" cried the fellow who had been first to recover from that surprise. "You hain't no right to chip in, jest to save a man from payin' the penalty fer killin' a poor critter like John Clegg! Stabbin' him from ahind, too!"

"Whoever says that, lies like a mangy cur!" indignantly cried Uncle Hi. "Fred was with me all night, and I can make oath that neither of us was within two miles of this place between sun and sun!"

"That ought to settle it, gentlemen," said Dandy Darling, retaining all his coolness, even while holding his pistols ready to foil a mad rush. "Now, suppose we talk business! If Fred Acton is guilty, he shall surely pay the full penalty."

"I'd sentence himself to hang, my own self, if I knew he had murdered a man," more quietly spoke Uncle Hi. "But as I can swear he could not, by any possibility, have committed the cring, I'm here to see him safe through, or go under trying!"

"Me, too, Uncle Hi!" promptly put in Jesse Rudge.

"And I will pledge my word, both as a man and an officer of the law," said Dandy Darling, striking while the iron was hot, "that if you gentlemen will bind yourselves to give over all thoughts of lynching until you have fairly and squarely proved your charges against Fred Acton, I'll agree not to lift a finger to hinder you punishing him to the full extent of the un-written law."

There was no immediate response, but the Boomers interchanged irresolute looks, and then Dandy Darling played his trump-card:

"In addition, gentlemen, I'll agree to point out the rascals who have been at the bottom of all your troubles since striking Oklahoma! I'll show you where the rascals harbor who fired the section, who sawed your bridge, who ran off your horses, who attempted to roast Fred Acton, and did abduct his sister, Miss Lettice; and—"

He could proceed no further, for such a storm of cries and cheers and eager questions poured upon him that his very voice was drowned.

When comparative silence was restored, at length, the Daisy spoke again, but not to utter the precise words for which all were hungering.

"If you doubt my ability to do all I say, gentlemen, ask Miss Acton if she was not captured by the chief of the gang I allude to; ask her if she did not hear him admit doing all I have told you, and if I was not fortunate enough to steal her out of the clutches of this gang."

"It is true—true as holy writ!" cried Lettice, lent strength of mind and body by the peril which still menaced her brother. "As I hope to meet my sainted parents in heaven after death, I swear this is true!"

"Acton won't try to cut an' run fer it, ef we strike a barg'in'" hesitated Alfred Kline.

"Why should I, when I've committed no sin?"

"I'll stand his bail," promptly put in Uncle Hi.

"And I'll not only go his bail," added Dandy Darling, "but I'll tell you all I found out about your enemies, and lead you to their Den through a back door, so you can strike them hard before they even begin to suspect what's coming!"

There was considerable talk, of course, before the bargain was fully made; but bitter as the Boomers felt against the supposed slayer of John Clegg, and the one whose crime had driven poor Christine to an untimely grave beneath the rolling river, they were still more savage in their lust for vengeance on the Sooners.

The balance was finally turned in Fred's favor, when word was passed from the doctor to the effect that John Clegg was not dead, but had revived sufficiently to mutter the name of his love.

After that, all the rest was quickly settled, as it had need to be, if the Boomers hoped to strike their enemy the coming night, under cover of which alone could they hope to get within striking distance unsuspected.

Fred Acton to remain at the town, guarded by the women and the doctor, who dared not leave his patient so soon. Then, after the fight was over, he was to be fairly and honestly tried by the Boomers, without prejudice for or against, to be convicted or set free in strict accordance with the evidence furnished them.

This having been arranged, the Boomers lost no further time in setting forth, stopping on the way to pick up their comrades at the gulch, all of whom gleefully hailed the prospect of "playin' even" at last.

Having kept his secret until his main point was secured, Dandy Darling gave a brief but clear sketch of his recent adventures, explaining how he had in the end frightened the whole truth out of Billy Blue.

The Big Buffalo Gang was really an aggregation of criminals, with their headquarters in the curiously shaped butte. They had played the role of "Sooners," mainly to secure all the neighboring land, to bar out all honest settlers, who might chance to discover the dangerous secrets hidden inside of the Big Buffalo.

At least one of those secrets Dandy Darling had solved while, as Dan Devoe, he had both scouted around the butte, and actually passed through the entire gang, to rescue Lettice Acton.

So far as they could tell, none of the possible scouts and spies of the gang discovered their approach, and when the shades of night began to fall, Dandy Darling hastened their progress, feeling safer under this cover. And having showed Clark Frazer the "front entrance" to the Den, warning him to lie low until he heard shots from inside, the Daisy made all haste back to where he had left his own force.

Leading them up the steep to the opening through which he and Lettice had escaped the night before, Dandy Darling led the way into the narrow tunnel. But before it was two-thirds traversed, there came the sound of shots and angry cries from no great distance ahead!

"Close in, lads!" cried Dandy Darling. "Make a clean sweep, now!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

ENDING AN EVIL CAREER.

DANDY DARLING felt far more like cursing than cheering just then, though he managed to keep his real sentiments masked from his eager followers, and led the charge through the narrow passage like one who knows victory is but a matter of claiming it.

As he could not possibly anticipate the whole truth, the Daisy quite naturally believed those cries and shots were at least in part raised and given by the Boomers under charge of Clark Frazer, who had been discovered by the enemy, or else who had pressed to the assault without waiting for the agreed-upon signal.

Even the best and coolest of men will occasionally get a little "rattled" when matters unexpectedly turn topsy-turvy, and this seemed to be an "off day" for the Daisy Detective.

He forgot some of the peculiarities of Big Buffalo Butte, and the indistinctness with which those sounds reached his ears, led him to take for granted that the fighting was being done in the main chamber, at or near the entrance in front of which he had posted Clark Frazer.

This error led to his rushing directly from the passage into the little rock chamber where Lettice Acton had been held in captivity, without pausing for a wary look ahead, as he surely would have done had not too great loss of sleep and rest of late somewhat dulled his natural shrewdness.

Still, matters might have been much worse, all things considered; for, just as Dandy Darling sprung into the chamber, he saw the victor in that short, savage, sanguinary duel, reel, then fall limply by the side of the man he had conquered.

He had time for but the one glance, however. Other ears had caught those ugly sounds, and their owners were rushing in to investigate.

As usual, the chamber was but dimly lighted, and without taking time and care, one could do little more than distinguish figures, not faces.

This was all in favor of the Boomers. They knew that only enemies could be before them, while the Sooners had no such positive assurance, since all knew that at least their captain and one other friend were in that quarter.

"Close in, men!" sharply cried Dandy Darling, setting the example. "Make a clean sweep—spare those who surrender to the law!"

With the first words the Daisy Detective was upon the bewildered gang, striking swiftly, surely, a clubbed pistol gripped by each hand, his arms working so rapidly that he seemed surrounded by the entire quartette of Indian gods, each and every one of them calling all their armed hands into play on his behalf!

Taken completely by surprise, lacking a leader, the Big Buffalo Gang fell back in rank dismay before that sturdy charge, only to have their discomfiture completed by running straight into the eager arms of Clark Frazer and his Boomers, the moment they reached the main chamber.

In several instances, individual members of that evil association fought hard and viciously, but for the most part their subjection was an easy matter. Such men are of little use without an acknowledged head, and Captain Kay Vaux was missing just when his spirit was needed the most.

As soon as he saw that complete victory was fairly insured, Dandy Darling bent all his energies toward saving life; something that, for a few minutes, promised to give him even more trouble than the taking of it. Now that they had a fair chance to "even up" with their merciless enemies, the Boomers were inclined to make the most of it.

Backed by Uncle Hi, Clark Frazer, and some of the other influential members, Dandy Darling soon succeeded in putting matters on a more

lawful, humane footing; and when this was done, he lost no further time in investigating that strange affair in the rock chamber.

The single candle was still burning on the narrow shelf, but Darling was not wholly dependent on its feeble rays, having caught up a lantern in the main chamber.

By its bright rays he quickly recognized the dark, fierce face of Kay Vaux, now rendered actually repulsive in death, by the savage fury which had animated his last moments. A partly emptied revolver lay on the floor by his right hand, but the long-bladed knife about the haft of which his left fingers were still curled, had done the most to avenge his own death.

A sharp, inarticulate cry startled Dandy Darling to turning quickly from the corpse of the chief, to see Jesse Rudge pointing at the man to whom Kay Vaux surely owed his death, his pale face actually frozen with horror and amazement combined.

"Who is it, man?" cried Darling, following that pointing finger, then quickly stooping over the bloody shape, his keen eyes detecting signs of lingering life!

"You devil! Hunted down! I'll—kill—" gasped the wounded wretch, making an effort to lift a weapon and use it against the one who was now only thinking of how to save his miserable life, enemies though they might have been but a short time before.

Dandy Darling easily disarmed the vicious rascal, and then looked to his wounds; a pistol wound, and two terrible slashes from the knife still clutched by Kay Vaux. Either wound was enough to insure death, and only a man of marvelous vitality could have survived so long.

"You know him, Rudge?" at length asked Darling, turning a keen look upon the agitated Boomer.

"I thought—let me see him—closer," muttered the young man, bending over the wounded knave, just as his eyes flew open. "Yes, I do know him!" giving an amazed glance at the breast which Darling had laid bare while examining his hurts. "He's really a man, boss?"

"Can't you see for yourself?" "Christine—Christine—Brockelmyer!"

Those big blue eyes turned swiftly in the direction of that voice, and then Jesse Rudge knew that there had been no mistake!

"He killed John Clegg—an' I see him do it!" hoarsely panted Rudge, rallying from the stunning shock that marvelous discovery had given him. "Make him 'fess up, boss! Make him 'fess all how he fooled the lot o' us—playin' he was a gal, Christine Brockelmyer!"

The wounded wretch broke into a husky, reckless laugh, then his big blue eyes were vailed once more. He lay like one dead, and for a few anxious moments Dandy Darling feared his lips would never reveal the strange secrets of his past career.

Fortunately, however, this was not to be.

An hour later, lying on a rude pallet of blankets, the dying plotter listened calmly to Jesse Rudge as the Boomer explained his seemingly impossible accusation of foul murder and incredible imposition.

Fired by jealousy, Rudge had dogged John Clegg and Christine Brockelmyer to the woods that night, and had kept them under close espial. He witnessed their parting: Christine begged John to wait until she had time to gain town before he should follow. Then—while his hot kisses were fresh upon her lips, Christine plunged that knife deep between John Clegg's shoulders, then fled like a ghost!

Rudge declared that for a brief space he was like one petrified, unable to trust the evidence of his own senses as against the woman whom he loved so passionately. But, at length, he forced himself to creep forward and examine that seeming corpse. He believed death had been instantaneous, and then he stole away, too utterly miserable to even ponder over his future course.

"It knocked me stiff when they laid it on Fred Acton, but even then I couldn't tell all I had see'd. Fer—I loved the gal—what I thought was a gal, cuss him!" flashing a venomous glance at the faintly smiling schemer. "But, ef I couldn't save Fred no other way, I was goin' to tell the hull truth—though it killed me!"

"R-a-t-s!" faintly drawled the dying man.

"You are at the point of death, my man," said Dandy Darling, both face and voice declaring his perfect truth as he bent over the being who had so completely deceived the Boomers. "You can have no fears of further punishment at our hands. Then—why not confess your crimes? Why not die with as clean a soul as possible?"

"Don't—preach—you!" frowned the dying man. "Drink—"

In silence a flask of whisky was held to his lips. He was past harming, even as he was beyond mortal help.

The fiery stimulant gave him fictitious powers, and causing his head to be lifted higher, he recklessly admitted the perfect truth of all Jesse Rudge had charged.

He had stabbed John Clegg, both to get rid of his dangerous love-making, and as an easy method of putting Fred Acton out of the world.

Why did he wish the last? Because Fred was

equal heir with Lettice, and she was to be his wife!

"If you want to—know why I—played Christine, ask—my divorced wife—Mrs. Nettie—Rhodes!"

Those were the last words consciously spoken by Baird Impleton, although he raved long and wildly before death finally came to his relief, laying bare many of the secrets which had bewildered the Big Buffalo Boomers.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

PAY DAY.

WITH the subjection of the Big Buffalo Gang, the real secret why they fought so desperately against the Big Buffalo Colony was revealed unto all.

As Dandy Darling had declared, the butte was little better than a shell, honeycombed with dens and cells and winding passages, many of which had been shrewdly utilized by the gang of law-breakers collected by Kay Vaux.

Among other illegal works, they had kept in pretty constant operation a whisky still, making vile spirits which found a ready sale and barter among both the civilized and the blanket tribes, the members of which could be trusted not to betray the gang, if only because they might never again have such a sure and ready means of catering to their passions.

Besides this, a close search unearthed molds and tools for coining bogus money, together with a vast quantity of material and many hundreds of dollars already coined, ready for scattering broadcast through the country.

Of all this, Dandy Darling, by virtue of his commission as Deputy United States Marshal, took charge, and which he eventually turned over to the proper authorities.

The secret stables were also found, in which the stolen horses belonging to the Boomers were comfortably installed, together with enough once owned by the Big Buffalo Gang to more than make amends for the losses inflicted upon the little colony.

"Never mention them to me," laughed Dandy Darling, waving off the men who hastened to report this discovery. "If you force me to listen or take note—as an officer of the law—I'll have to put the U. S. brand on the lot, and—I'm rather hard of hearing, you see, my friends! What was it you wanted to say?"

Nothing more about those horses, be sure!

Kay Vaux was buried at the base of the Big Buffalo Butte, in company with two of his men, killed because they preferred death to surrender. Baird Impleton was borne back to the town, for the purpose of positive identification by his divorced wife, the cousin of Uncle Hi Powell.

Having put his prisoners in bonds, and detailed a trusty number to guard them until he could bring a squad of soldiers to take full possession of the premises, Dandy Darling took a few men with him and set out for the places where he had other game stored away.

Billy Blue was found in a wretched condition, thanks to his wound and his fears combined, but he was able to be carried as far as the butte, after food and drink had been administered.

Dan Devoe was found just as the Daisy had left him, bound to the drift. He was cut loose and conveyed over to where his partner was being cared for, there to receive much the same treatment. In due course of time they were handed over to the proper authorities, in company with the rest of the gang, and after trial, were found guilty and sentenced accordingly.

Not until the two firebugs were safely transferred to the butte, and everything was put in order there, did Dandy Darling turn his face toward the town of Big Buffalo, where he knew a glorious reward awaited his claiming.

Of the meeting which followed his arrival, nothing may be said. To give it in full would consume far too much space, and to merely sketch the outline would hardly be just to those more intimately concerned.

Enough that Fred Acton was immediately set free, to have each one of the Boomers heartily congratulate him on his perfect vindication. Perhaps 'twas only human nature that those who had been the most eager to lynch him out of hand, were now the most enthusiastic in their congratulations.

Mrs. Nettie Rhodes fully identified the corpse as that of Baird Impleton, once her husband. And both Uncle Hi and Lettice likewise recognized that face, now it was laid bare to their gaze.

More than a year before the events which have been detailed in these pages, Baird Impleton formed the acquaintance of Powell, and, through him, of Lettice Acton, to whom he made hot and persistent love.

He might have won his point, for he was a handsome, plausible, well-educated fellow, only for the unexpected coming of Mrs. Rhodes on a visit to her cousin, whom she had not seen for many years. She recognized and denounced Impleton, who instantly fled to escape the wrath of Uncle Hi, who, for the first time, learned how much his cousin had suffered through her ill-starred marriage to the wretch who had so terribly abused her, before commit-

ting a burglary which sent him to jail for a long term of years. Mrs. Impleton procured a divorce, with the right to wear her maiden name.

Impleton escaped from the penitentiary, and in some manner learned the facts concerning a vast fortune having been left to Maurice Acton, or his heirs, in case of his death. How he managed to discover the heirs, was never fully explained, but after his failure to win Lettice for a wife, he assumed the cunning disguise of a woman, and joined the colony, with the express purpose of putting Fred out of the way, and forcing Lettice to marry him.

His task was rendered all the more difficult by the fact that his divorced wife was a member of the company, but thanks to his wonderful skill as an actor, the villain came perilously near success.

He had intentionally led Lettice away from the delayed train, knowing that Fred would certainly follow at the first opportunity. He had bargained with Kay Vaux to have men in watching to carry off Lettice and make sure Fred did not escape the fire which was to be started a certain time after their leaving the train. Thanks to the whirlwind spreading the fire prematurely, not only his plans, but his very life was endangered.

He was following out his carefully laid plans in separating brother from sister, and his was the hand that fired the shot which came so near dooming Fred Acton to a horrible death. And it was during those thrilling moments that he secured the knife which, afterward, was to lay poor John Clegg low, and almost put the noose about an innocent neck.

All that followed after the fire, was improvised by the schemer, acting as best he might, never losing sight of his fixed goal. And when, after his pretended suicide in the river, Impleton made his way to Buffalo Butte, to learn that Lettice had been rescued, he charged Kay Vaux with trying to play him false: a charge which brought about the death of both knaves.

Dandy Darling, at a later hour explained that he was in quest of the Acton heirs, the case having been placed in his hands by the firm who had charge of the property. He had kept the matter secret for some time after being reasonably confident the legal heirs had been found, partly because he wanted to make perfectly sure he was not mistaken, and because—

"I wanted to win the poor boomer girl, if I could," he whispered in a pretty ear. "Was I wrong, Letty? Was it a case of false pretense? Will you think me too much of a fortune-hunter to make a good husband? Am I beyond forgiveness?"

"You saved my life, when it seemed fairly lost!" murmured Lettice.

"And—may I ask Uncle Hi? Or, is it Fred?"

"Don't you think—isn't there some one else to ask—first?"

Perhaps there was at the moment her lips so softly, so hesitatingly shaped the question, but the same could not be said with truth two minutes later!

And what did Letty say?

Just what her trembling lips had said that night in the rock chamber at Buffalo Butte, of course! And—curious, isn't it?—on neither occasion did so much as one little word find utterance!

But Dandy Darling was perfectly satisfied, so we have no right to object, criticise or even comment!

THE END.

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